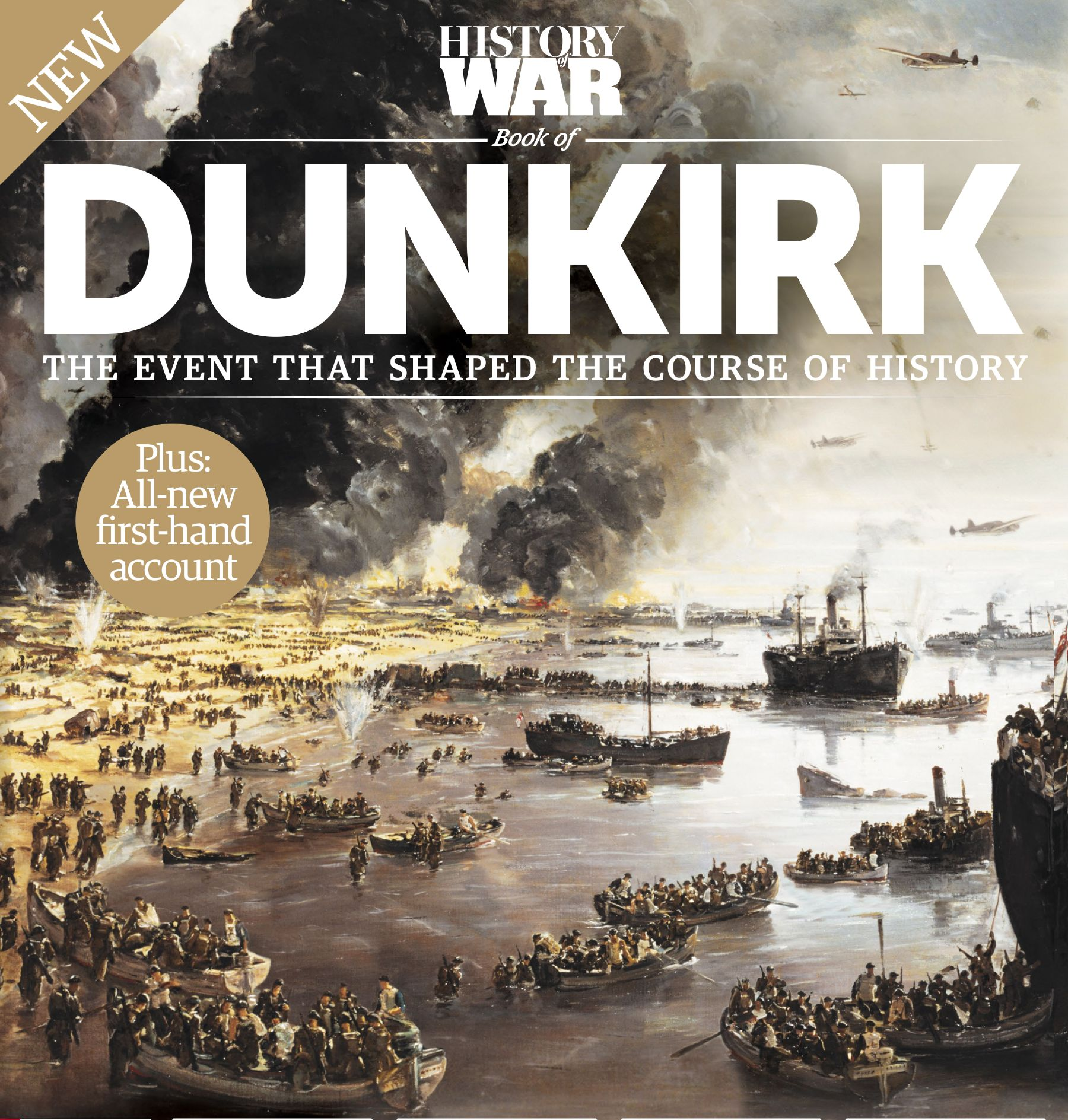
NEW

HISTORY of WAR

Book of

DUNKIRK

THE EVENT THAT SHAPED THE COURSE OF HISTORY



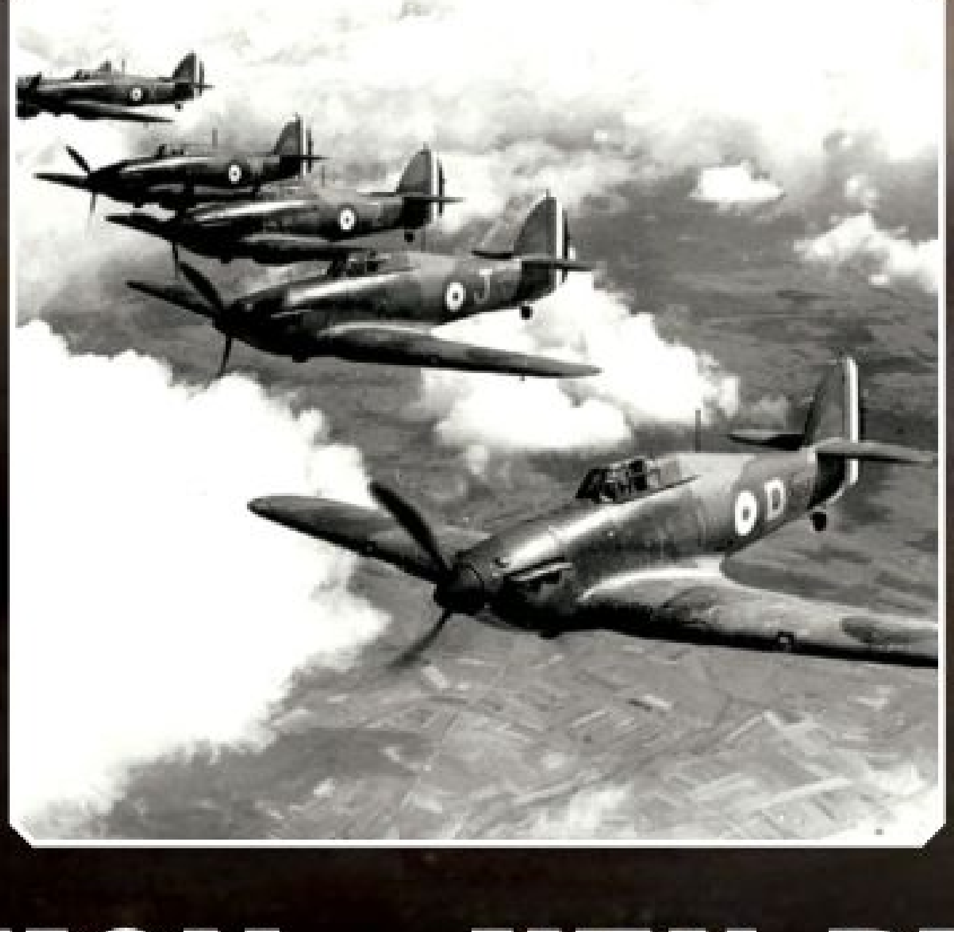
Plus: All-new first-hand account

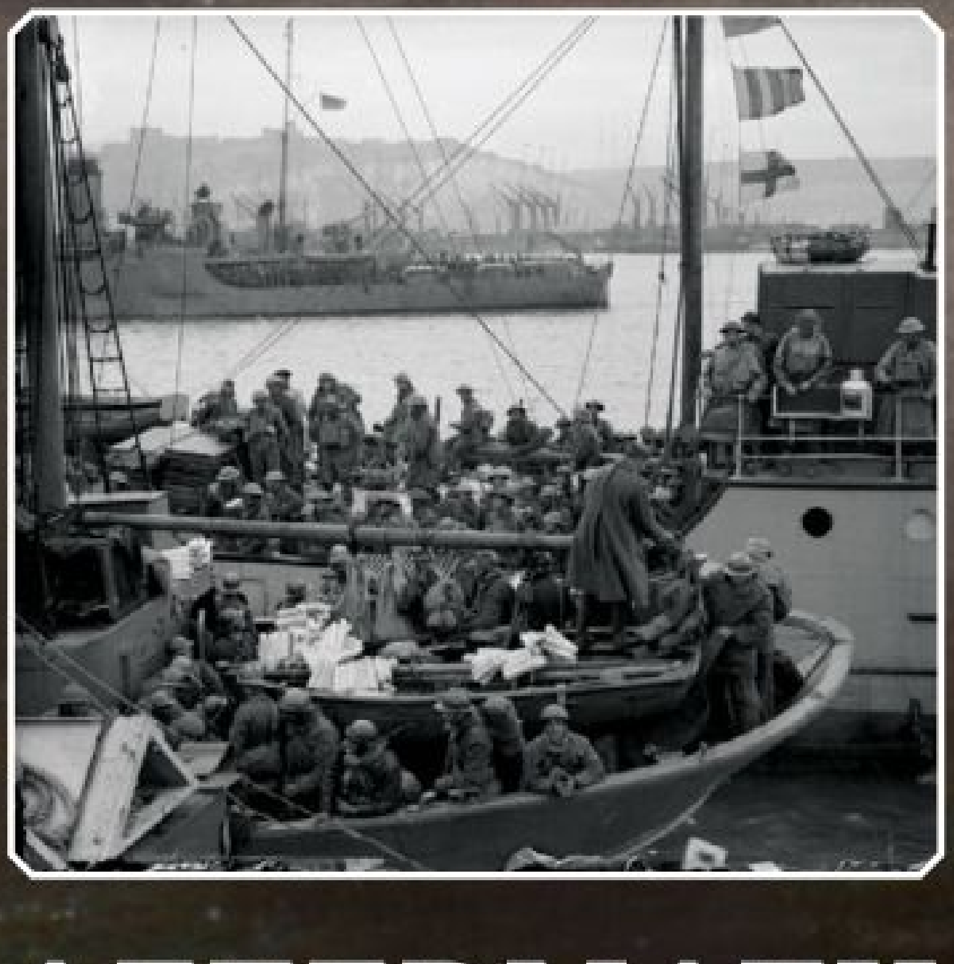
Digital Edition

FUTURE

FOURTH EDITION

RAILWAY
HENRY TELFER





THE EVACUATION • KEY PLAYERS • THE AFTERMATH

VISIT…

LANZAROTE
Caliente.com

HISTORY of WAR

Book of

DUNKIRK

The evacuation of Dunkirk is seen by many as one of the miracles of World War II. Saving the lives of thousands of Allied soldiers, it was a triumph of organisation and resilience, but one that came at the end of a military defeat that pushed back the Allies and almost ended with cataclysmic losses. The History of War Book of Dunkirk examines the events that led up to the evacuation, as the British Expeditionary Force prepared for the German invasion. It includes in-depth articles on how the biggest evacuation in military history unfolded, from the plans and decisions made to the ships, weapons and key players involved. It also analyses the outcome of this epic rescue operation, exploring various opinions on whether it truly was a miracle, and investigating what happened next. Featuring exclusive interviews and poignant photographs, this is an essential companion for anyone with an interest in the evacuation of Dunkirk.

This bookazine is printed on recycled paper. It's important that we care about our planet and make a difference where we can, for us and every generation that follows.

HISTORY of WAR

Book of

DUNKIRK

Future PLC Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill,
Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ

Editorial
Editor **Sarah Bankes**
Designer **Perry Wardell-Wicks**
Compiled by **Alice Barnes-Brown & Ali Innes**
Editorial Director **Jon White**
Senior Art Editor **Andy Downes**

Cover images
Getty Images

Advertising
Media packs are available on request
Commercial Director **Clare Dove**
clare.dove@futurenet.com

International
Head of Print Licensing **Rachel Shaw**
licensing@futurenet.com

Circulation
Head of Newstrade **Tim Mathers**

Production
Head of Production **Mark Constance**
Production Project Manager **Clare Scott**
Advertising Production Manager **Joanne Crosby**
Digital Editions Controller **Jason Hudson**
Production Managers **Keely Miller, Nola Cokely,**
Vivienne Calvert, Fran Twentyman

Management
Chief Content Officer **Aaron Asadi**
Commercial Finance Director **Dan Jotcham**
Head of Art & Design **Greg Whitaker**

Printed by William Gibbons, 26 Planetary Road,
Willenhall, West Midlands, WV13 3XT

Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
www.marketforce.co.uk Tel: 0203 787 9001

History of War Book of Dunkirk Fourth Edition
© 2019 Future Publishing Limited

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards. The manufacturing paper mill and printer hold full FSC and PEFC certification and accreditation.

All contents © 2019 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

FUTURE

Connectors.
Creators.
Experience
Makers.

Future plc is a public
company quoted on the
London Stock Exchange
(symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

Chief executive **Zillah Byng-Thorne**
Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief financial officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

Part of the
HISTORY of WAR
bookazine series

Widely Recycled

ipso. For press freedom with responsibility

CONTENTS

8 Key events of the Dunkirk evacuation
The moments that shaped such an epic military evacuation

THE BUILD-UP

18 Preparing for the German invasion
How the BEF made use of the prelude to the German attack

22 Key player: Heinz Guderian
The headstrong father of the blitzkrieg – and his panzers

28 A fatally flawed plan
The Germans cross the Meuse river into the Allied rear

34 French disaster unfolds
What such a failure meant for French forces in the area

36 Fighting retreat to Dunkirk
How the BEF continued, despite the weight of enemy assaults

40 Key player: John Vereker (Lord Gort)
The BEF commander who faced a hideous dilemma

THE EVACUATION

48 Desperation at Dunkirk
British commanders approve the epic sealift evacuation

56 Key player: Bertram Ramsay
What happened after he was coaxed from retirement

62 All haste to Dunkirk
Fraught with peril, Operation Dynamo continued

72 Escaping Dunkirk
Veteran Garth Wright shares his Dunkirk experience

78 The curtain falls at Dunkirk
The final days of the sealift evacuation come to an end

88 Key player: Gerd von Rundstedt
The man who initiated the halt order, giving Allies escape time

92 The role of the Royal Navy
Proving its resilience when bringing the troops home

98 The shadow fleet
The hundreds of commercial ships and small vessels that contributed

106 The role of the RAF
How the RAF struggled against the Luftwaffe's numbers

112 The weapons of Dunkirk
From the Messerschmitt to the various panzers

120

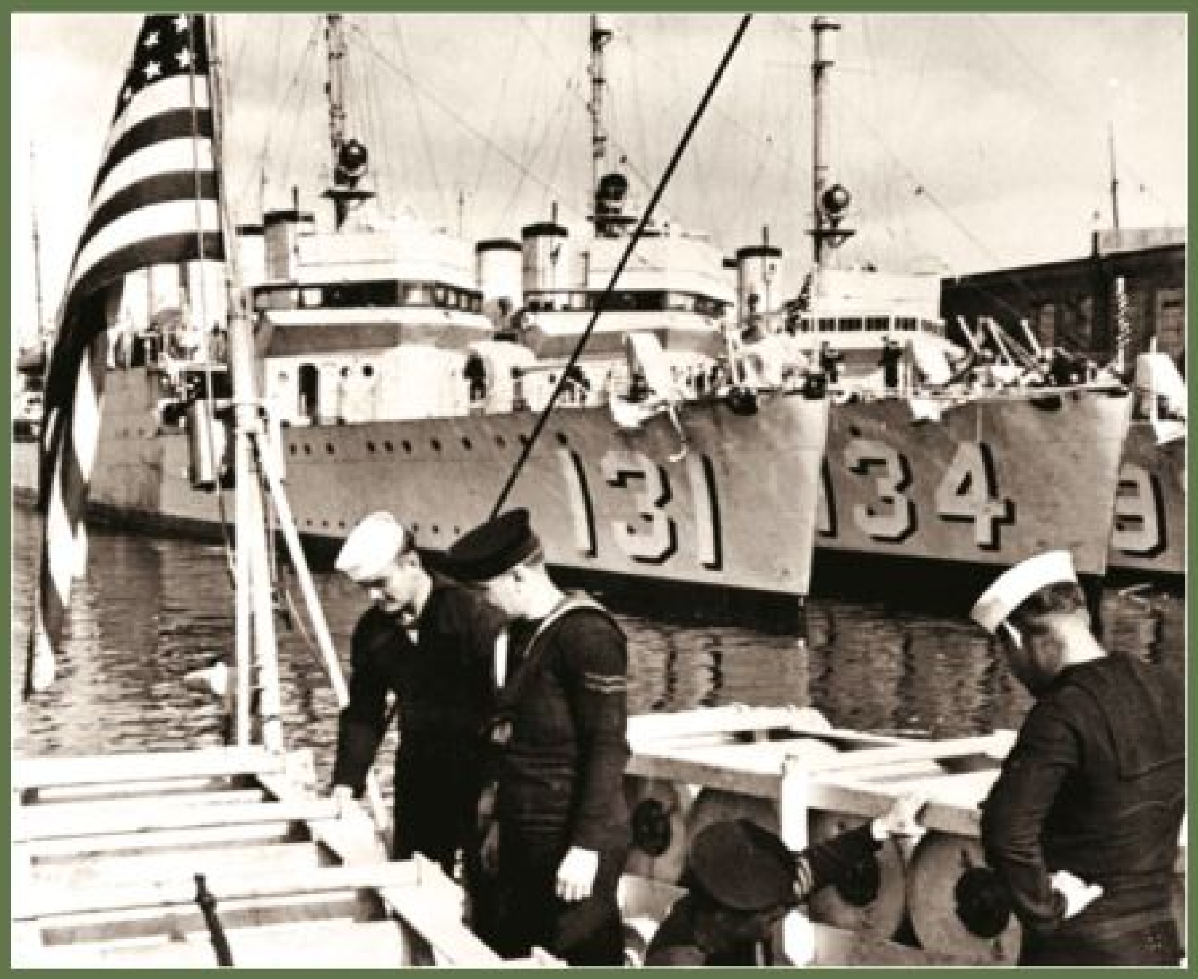
THE AFTERMATH

120 A victory inside deliverance
The outcome of the evacuation offered hope to the Allies

128 Facing fresh challenges
What awaited Britain after it had extricated its army from France

134 The 'miracle' of Dunkirk?
Analysing some of the decisions surrounding the evacuation

140 What if… Heeresgruppe A had been bombed in the Ardennes?
The German Offensive relied on speed, but all did not go according to plan



106

BEARN
BEARN

134

98

22

128

KEY EVENTS OF THE DUNKIRK EVACUATION

THE MOMENTS THAT SHAPED THE LARGEST MILITARY EVACUATION OF ALL TIME AND ONE OF THE MOST MIRACULOUS ESCAPE PLANS OF THE WAR

THE PHONEY WAR ENDS

10 MAY 1940

FRENCH-GERMAN BORDER

After invading Poland and levelling Polish capital Warsaw to the ground, Hitler is ready to turn his attention to France. The scene of the German capitulation in World War I, the Führer is eager to utilise his new blitzkrieg tactics, which destroy the Polish once more. The British and French Phoney War ends abruptly as the Wehrmacht opens up a Western Front, marching over the border into France. Avoiding the heavily defended French Maginot Line, the three German army groups divide themselves into two main assaults, one through the Ardennes region, and the other through the Netherlands and Belgium. Both the French Army and the British forces in Europe, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), are entirely unprepared for the lightning war that is about to strike them. The Battle of France has begun.

GERMAN SOLDIERS PARACHUTE INTO THE NETHERLANDS

10 MAY

THE NETHERLANDS

CHAMBERLAIN RESIGNS AS PRIME MINISTER

10 MAY 1940

LONDON, ENGLAND

On the day that Hitler launches his invasion of France, Neville Chamberlain resigns as prime minister of the United Kingdom. Having long preached the benefits of appeasement and "peace for our time," Chamberlain, dismayed and pressured by the British military's poor performance in Norway, believes it is the time to step down and let Britain rally behind a new leader. The men in the frame to replace him as prime minister are Lord Halifax and Winston Churchill. Chamberlain will stay on to serve as lord president of the Council, but resign again due to ill health in October 1940. He would die just a month later. Back in Europe, the British, French and Belgian armies are in disarray as German parachute regiments prepare to land in the Netherlands and Belgium, and panzers roll through the Ardennes.

CHURCHILL SPEAKS

13 MAY 1940

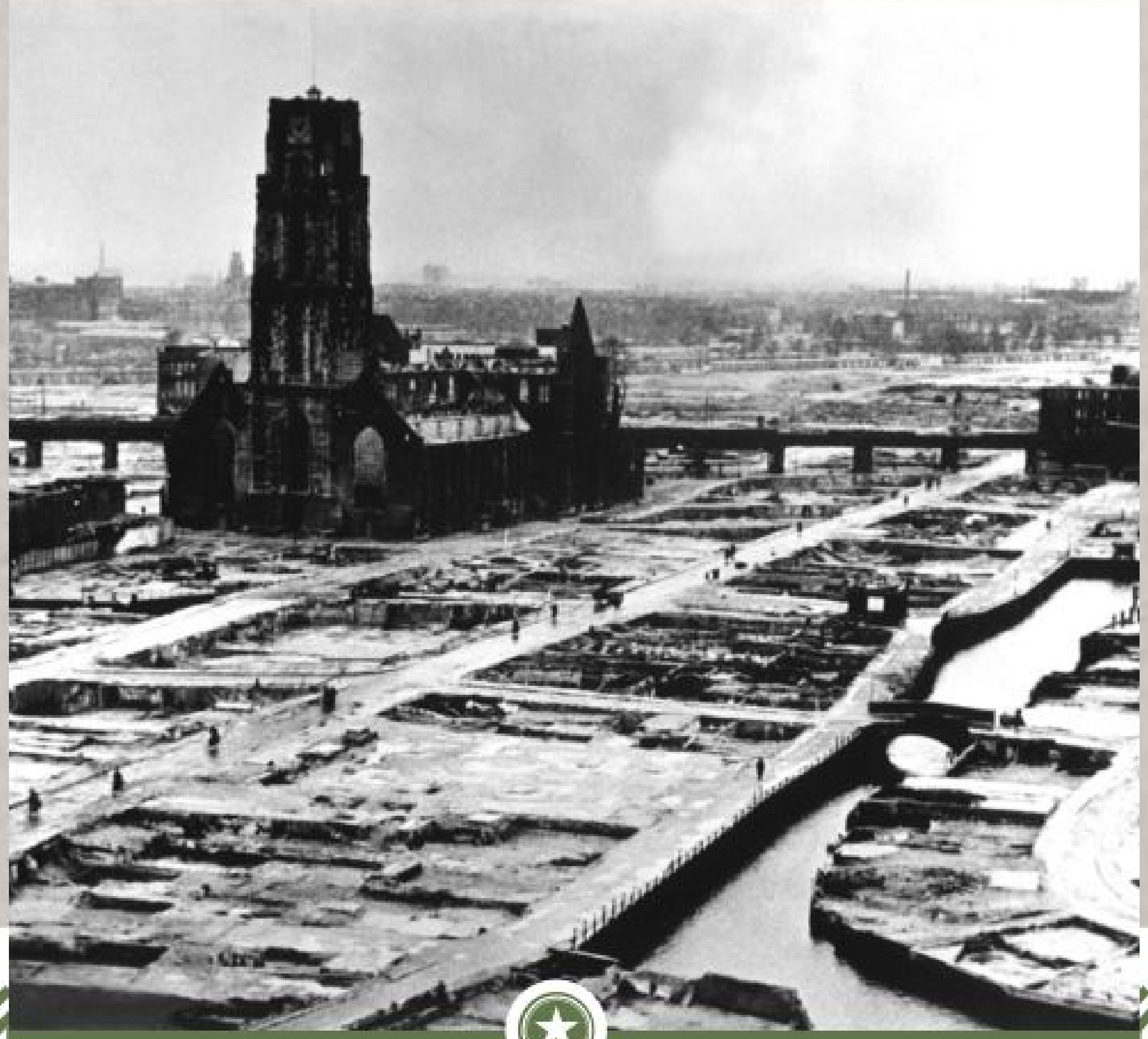
LONDON, ENGLAND

As the Wehrmacht advances westwards into France, Britain is in a state of political turmoil. The British war cabinet is divided. Newly appointed prime minister Winston Churchill believes the country should fight on against the Nazis, while Lord Halifax is convinced that a peace settlement with Hitler is the only option. On 13 May, Churchill addresses the House of Commons with his famous speech. "I have nothing to offer, but blood, toil, tears and sweat," he tells parliament. "We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, 'What is our policy?' I will say, 'It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny.'"

GUDERIAN'S PANZER CORPS BREAKS THROUGH

13 MAY

SEDAN, FRANCE



BOMBING OF ROTTERDAM

14 MAY 1940

ROTTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

Ever since war was declared in September 1939, the Netherlands had remained neutral. Hitler, not one to respect pacts and treaties, orders parachute regiments to enter the country ahead of the main army group. He also sanctions the bombing of one of the county's largest cities, Rotterdam. The air raid levels the city and 1,000 civilians are killed. The ferocity of the bombing shocks the Dutch, with more than 100 tons of bombs dropped on the city, destroying its Medieval old town. The Dutch government would surrender the next day, fearful of other cities seeing the same fate. The Dutch royal family and government would flee to the United Kingdom and form a government-in-exile while the country would remain under occupation for the remainder of the war.

BELGIANS BLOW UP BRIDGES OVER THE MEUSE RIVER

12 MAY

LIEGE, BELGIUM

> "BOTH THE FRENCH ARMY AND THE BRITISH FORCES IN EUROPE, THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE, ARE ENTIRELY UNPREPARED FOR THE LIGHTNING WAR THAT IS ABOUT TO STRIKE THEM"

FALL OF BRUSSELS

16 MAY 1940

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

After the surrender of the Netherlands, the defeat of Belgium does not take long. Previously invaded by the Germans in World War I, the blitzkrieg makes much shorter work of the neutral country this time around. The British and French armies, powerless to resist the German advance, had advocated Plan D, a fighting withdrawal that would let the Wehrmacht invade Belgium from the east while maintaining a defensive line further west between Namur and Antwerp. The Belgians put a lot of faith into defending the Eben-Emael fortress, but its garrison of 1,200 men had been outmanoeuvred by German glider troops on 10 May. This was a huge loss, and the country gradually falls to defeat, but still manages to delay the German advance to help aid the British withdrawal across the Channel.

LORD GORT WARNS WITHDRAWAL A PROBABILITY

19 MAY

LONDON, ENGLAND

FIRST EVACUATION MEETING TAKES PLACE

20 MAY

DOVER, ENGLAND

GENERAL WEYGAND REPLACES GENERAL GAMELIN AS SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER

20 MAY

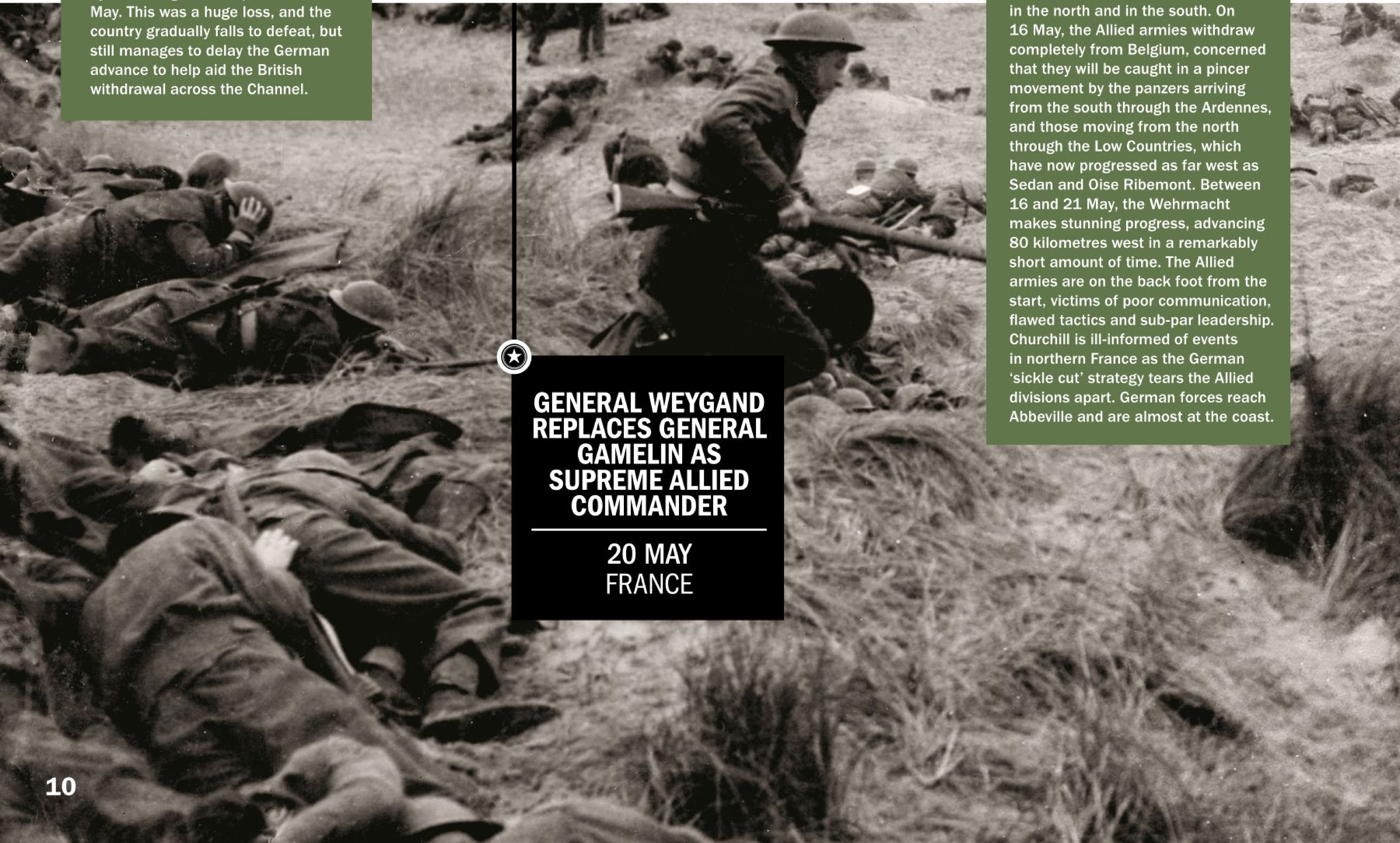
FRANCE

THE PANZERS ROLL WEST

16-21 MAY 1940

NORTHERN FRANCE

The blitzkrieg is now in full flow. The German armoured divisions are simply too strong for the Allies both in the north and in the south. On 16 May, the Allied armies withdraw completely from Belgium, concerned that they will be caught in a pincer movement by the panzers arriving from the south through the Ardennes, and those moving from the north through the Low Countries, which have now progressed as far west as Sedan and Oise Ribemont. Between 16 and 21 May, the Wehrmacht makes stunning progress, advancing 80 kilometres west in a remarkably short amount of time. The Allied armies are on the back foot from the start, victims of poor communication, flawed tactics and sub-par leadership. Churchill is ill-informed of events in northern France as the German 'sickle cut' strategy tears the Allied divisions apart. German forces reach Abbeville and are almost at the coast.



BEF AND FRENCH COUNTERATTACK ON ARRAS

21 MAY
ARRAS, FRANCE

THE HALT ORDER
23 MAY 1940
NORTHERN FRANCE

There had been a faint glimmer of hope that the Germans could be repelled, and a counterattack at Arras on 21 May made some gains before being rebuffed. But when they crossed the Somme on 22 May, the panzers drove further into France. The land occupied by the BEF and French forces had been getting smaller and smaller as they were pushed further to the coast. When the advance of Army Group A is briefly halted on 23 May, the Allies are given three days of valuable breathing space. Commander Gerd von Rundstedt is convinced that the German panzers can't take any more wear and tear, and issues a halt request to Hitler. The Führer agrees, and the tanks are stopped and given some time to cool off. It's not fully known whether the repairs are vital or whether it is over-confidence on the German's part, but it is a respite that is badly needed for the British and the French.

DUNKIRK BOMBED BY LUFTWAFFE

24 MAY
DUNKIRK, FRANCE

THE TAKING OF BOULOGNE
24-25 MAY 1940
BOULOGNE, FRANCE

The French port of Boulogne falls into German hands as the drive to the coast resumes. The fighting outside the city is intense and lasts for three days, but ultimately the German war machine prevails. What remains of the BEF is now in full retreat to Dunkirk, the only remaining port open for an evacuation. The BEF has been squeezed to the coast and has nowhere else to run other than back across the Channel to Britain. The British race to Dunkirk, and establish a perimeter to be held around the city while the evacuation gets underway. Lord Gort disobeys orders to support the French in the south, and instead decides to reinforce the north to allow an evacuation to take place. It is code-named Operation Dynamo.

15 FRENCH ARMY GENERALS ARE DISMISSED

25 MAY
FRANCE

BELGIAN KING LEOPOLD SURRENDERS HIS ARMY, LEAVING JUST THE BRITISH AND FRENCH MANNING WHAT IS LEFT OF THE WESTERN FRONT

26 MAY
BELGIUM

OPERATION DYNAMO
26 MAY 1940
DUNKIRK, FRANCE

Operation Dynamo begins in earnest at 6.57pm. Concocted by Vice-Admiral Bertram Ramsey, he orchestrates the deployment of a 1,000-vessel flotilla from his protective bunker deep inside the white cliffs of Dover. All hands are on deck as the admiralty gathers an assortment of craft, both military and civilian. Everything from destroyers to cabin cruisers are sent across the Channel, and the legend of the 'little ships' is born, as civilian mariners from all over the south coast gather at Sheerness Dockyard in Kent and head to France to help save the stricken BEF. The initial aim is to ferry 45,000 men back to Britain, and 8,000 are evacuated overnight on the first day.

INVASION OF CALAIS

27 MAY 1940

CALAIS, FRANCE

The Germans creep towards Dunkirk as Calais falls to the blitzkrieg. The port is held for three days by 4,000 French and British soldiers putting up dogged resistance. Outnumbered three to one, they are destroyed, but not before providing vital time for the now-hurried BEF withdrawal. The noose is being tightened around the defensive boundary of Dunkirk as more men scramble onto the beaches. Dunkirk itself isn't completely safe from harm, as the Luftwaffe and German artillery bomb the city and machine gun the beaches. The RAF does its best to quell the threat from the skies, but can't stop Stukas and Messerschmitts from raining down projectiles on the unprotected soldiers. Back in the UK, all civilians are asked to provide whatever boats they can to assist Operation Dynamo.

FIRST MERCHANT NAVY CREWS REACH DUNKIRK

26 MAY

DUNKIRK, FRANCE

EASTERN MOLE FIRST USED AS A DEPARTURE POINT

27 MAY

DUNKIRK, FRANCE

EXTRACTION FROM THE BEACHES

28-30 MAY 1940

DUNKIRK, FRANCE

By 28 May, 25,000 have made the journey back to Britain. The port of Dunkirk is out of action for any departures, due to Luftwaffe bombing, so soldiers are now forced to wade out into the sea from the beaches to reach smaller vessels that will take them to the Royal Navy destroyers. The only area that the destroyers can access is the eastern mole. Located at the entrance of Dunkirk harbour, many men are also extracted from here. After a meeting with French General Blanchard, Gort explains that the BEF evacuation is already underway. Blanchard scoffs at the idea and refuses to withdraw to the line the British have established. Back in England, soldiers flood into Dover as trains take them further inland. Ships are refuelled at the port before being sent back to collect more men.

BELGIUM SURRENDERS UNCONDITIONALLY

28 MAY

BELGIUM

DESTROYER HMS WAKEFUL SUNK

29 MAY

ENGLISH CHANNEL

THE EVACUATION CONTINUES

31 MAY 1940

DUNKIRK, FRANCE

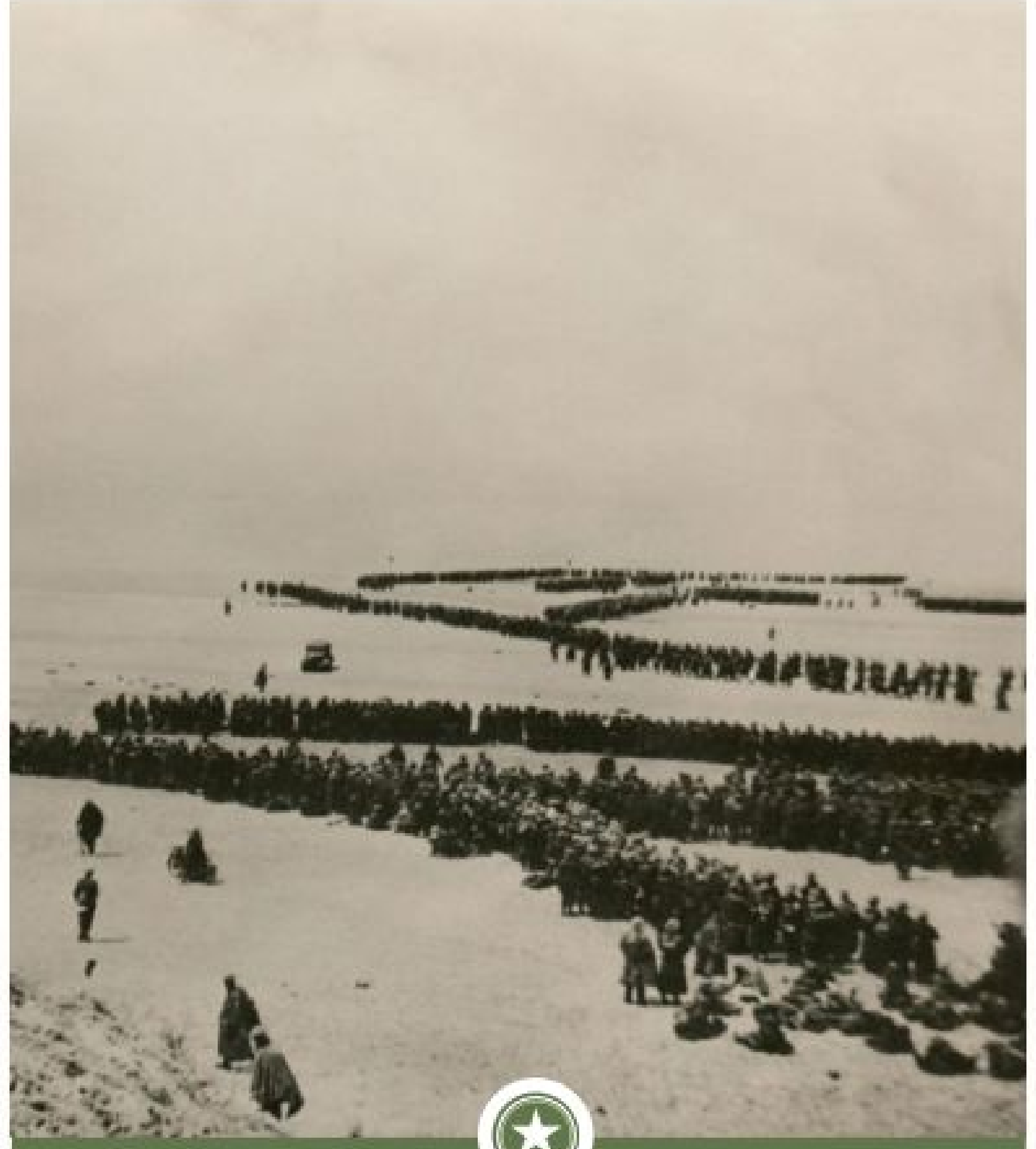
Lord Gort, commander of the BEF, takes his leave on 31 May. Initially only members of the BEF are allowed to leave on the boats, but this is later extended to both Belgian and French soldiers. 68,000 men have now been safely evacuated. The miracle of Dunkirk is reaching its zenith, but many of the men are returning home disheartened, their morale shattered by the seemingly unstoppable German advance. The Germans, meanwhile, are already making plans to take Paris. The attack on Dunkirk is now solely from the air, as Göring is confident that he alone can cause enough damage, and Hitler is unwilling to risk any more land troops. He is convinced that Britain will be brought to the negotiating table imminently.

GENERAL ALEXANDER TAKES COMMAND OF THE EVACUATION

31 MAY
LONDON, ENGLAND

FOUR DESTROYERS ARE SUNK

1 JUNE
ENGLISH CHANNEL



NIGHTTIME WITHDRAWAL

1 JUNE 1940
DUNKIRK, FRANCE

With the threat of Luftwaffe growing larger by the day, Operation Dynamo is now restricted to hours of darkness. The RAF has downed 100 Luftwaffe aircraft during the operation, but has been unable to prevent many attacks. The men on the beaches have no protection from assaults from above, but are saved by poor weather conditions preventing German aircraft from taking off, as well as Göring's failure to coordinate an effective concluding blow. Hitler briefly calls on his army to advance once more, but they meet stiffer resistance this time around, and it is again left to the Luftwaffe to finish the job.

DUNKIRK ABLAZE

2 JUNE 1940
DUNKIRK, FRANCE

Throughout the evacuation, the centre of Dunkirk has burned a fiery red as the Luftwaffe dropped bomb after bomb in an attempt to defeat the Allied garrison. As all the soldiers had been busy fighting for their lives or escaping onto boats, there was no one to extinguish the fires that raged all over the city. Even when evacuees make it to the boats they are not safe, as Stukas strafe the decks with machine-gun bursts. Hitler's reluctance to use land troops and trust in the Luftwaffe means the Allies are able to hold a five-kilometre-deep defensive zone just across the Belgian border, north of Dunkirk.

LAST BRITISH TROOPS LEAVE AT MIDNIGHT

2 JUNE
DUNKIRK, FRANCE

FINAL NIGHT OF THE EVACUATION

3 JUNE 1940
DUNKIRK, FRANCE

In total, 338,226 British, French, Belgian, Polish and Canadian troops have been successfully withdrawn. Sadly, 217 vessels didn't make it back to Britain, 161 of which are 'little ships'. Back home, jubilation greets the returning soldiers, but the men are weary and shocked at having to withdraw so quickly while losing so many men. The British newspapers herald the evacuation 'a miracle', but many are disheartened by the capitulation, despite the lives saved, as it is quite simply a crushing defeat. That said, the successful evacuation would convince many to carry on the fight against Hitler and Nazism.

FINAL EVACUATION SAVES MANY REMAINING FRENCH SOLDIERS

3 JUNE
DUNKIRK, FRANCE

AIR RAIDS ON PARIS

3 JUNE
PARIS, FRANCE

GERMAN DUNKIRK

4 JUNE 1940
DUNKIRK, FRANCE

Operation Dynamo finally ends at 10.30am as the last small ships leave. German troops enter Dunkirk shortly after. They find bodies strewn across the beaches, and huge amounts of equipment that the fleeing soldiers couldn't take with them, from tanks and heavy machine guns to motorcycles that the British simply couldn't transport from the shoreline to a vessel. A total of 68,111 BEF soldiers didn't make it onto one of the boats, and were either killed or made prisoners of war. 500,000 tons of ammunition was also lost to the enemy, along with 63,879 vehicles.

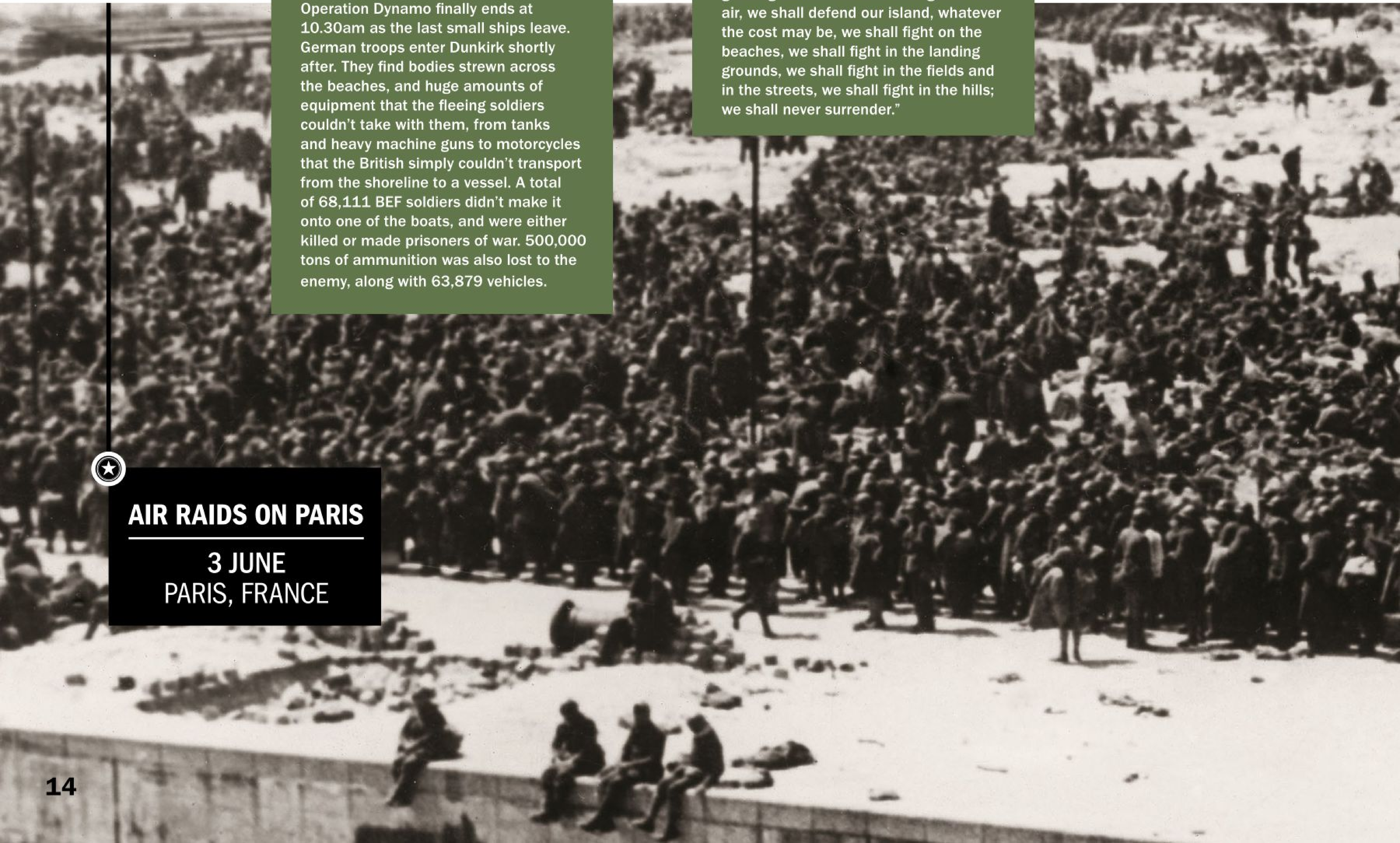
WINSTON CHURCHILL SPEAKS AGAIN

4 JUNE 1940
LONDON, ENGLAND

With the evacuation now complete, Churchill addresses the House of Commons on the events of the previous month. Describing the evacuation as a "miracle of deliverance," the prime minister describes the withdrawal as if a victory was won, but calls the retreat and loss of military equipment a disaster. Churchill ends his 35-minute speech with a warning that a German invasion of Britain is on its way, and he encourages the continued defence of British shores. He reminds parliament and the nation of Britain's ability to defeat Napoleon in the past, and ends with a rousing crescendo: "We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight in the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

40,000 FRENCH SOLDIERS TAKEN PRISONER

4 JUNE
DUNKIRK, FRANCE



> “THE FRENCH OFFICIALLY SURRENDER ON 22 JUNE IN THE SAME RAILWAY CARRIAGE THAT WAS USED FOR THE GERMAN SURRENDER IN 1918”

MARCH TO PARIS

5 JUNE 1940

NORTHERN FRANCE

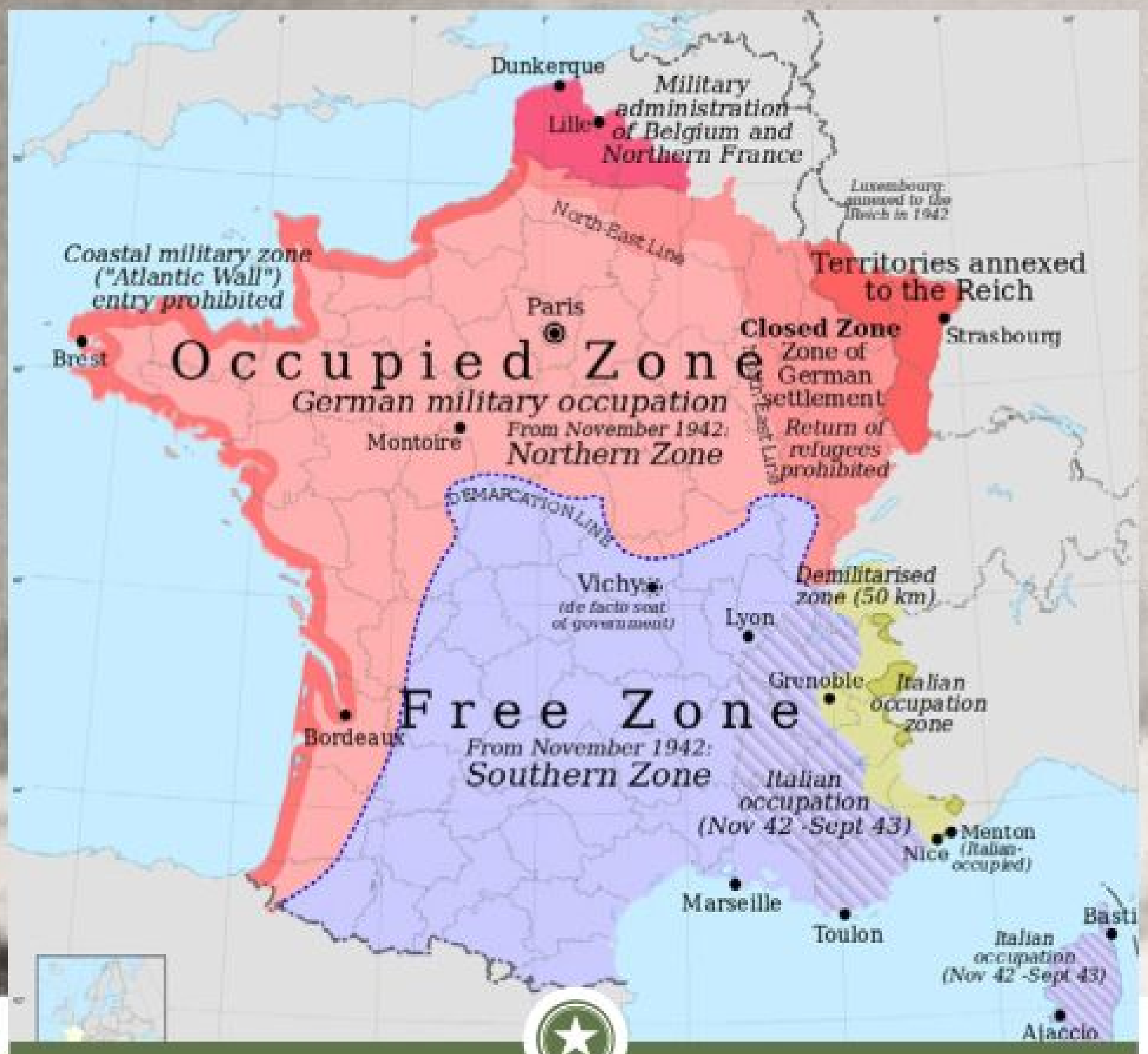
With the BEF now safely back on British soil, Hitler is free to focus on the remainder of France. The French government is wary of the fate of Rotterdam and Warsaw, so declares Paris a free city to save its architecture. 2 million Parisians leave the French capital, and on 10 June, the French government would relocate itself to Tours, a town 240 kilometres south west of Paris. Charles de Gaulle would go on to set up a government-in-exile in Britain and rally the French soldiers now on British soil, as well as those still in France, to fight another day.

OTHER EVACUATIONS

19 JUNE 1940

VARIOUS FRENCH PORTS

The miracle of Dunkirk has not been an isolated event. Further south, boats speed out of many French harbours to the safety of Britain. Ports all the way down to the Spanish border are scenes of mass deportations, and 190,000 French and Polish troops are evacuated from Bayonne on 19 June aboard Polish ships. Known as Operation Ariel, Saint-Nazaire, La Pallice, Saint-Jean-de-Luz and Gironde are also used as withdrawal points. On the same day, Cherbourg is shelled into submission by 5pm, and the Germans arrive in Brest only to find the port destroyed by the Allies.


Dunkerque
Military administration of Belgium and Northern France
Lille
Luxembourg: annexed to the Reich in 1942
North-East Line
Coastal military zone ("Atlantic Wall") entry prohibited
Territories annexed to the Reich
Paris
Strasbourg
Brest
Occupied Zone
German military occupation
Closed Zone
Zone of German settlement
Return of refugees prohibited
Montoire
From November 1942: Northern Zone
DEMARCATION LINE
Vichy (de facto seat of government)
Demilitarised zone (50 km)
Lyon
Grenoble
Italian occupation zone
Free Zone
Bordeaux
From November 1942: Southern Zone
Italian occupation (Nov 42 -Sept 43)
Menton (Italian-occupied)
Nice
Marseille
Toulon
Basti
Italian occupation (Nov 42 -Sept 43)
Ajaccio

FRANCE SURRENDERS

22 JUNE 1940

PARIS/VERSAILLES

Paris had been declared an open city on 12 June, just over a month after the blitzkrieg first hit. The French officially surrender on 22 June in the same railway carriage that was used for the German surrender in 1918. This is a huge propaganda victory for Hitler, and ends a dark and humiliating month for the Allies. A day later, the Führer goes sightseeing around Paris. The defeated French government moves to Vichy and collaborates with the Germans for the remainder of the war, while the French resistance fights on. British forces would not return to France until the summer of 1944.

THE BUILD-UP

18 Preparing for the German invasion
How the BEF made use of the prelude to the German attack with essential training

22 Key player: Heinz Guderian
The headstrong father of the blitzkrieg and his powerful panzers

28 A fatally flawed plan
As the British advanced to the Dyle river, the Germans crossed the Meuse river

34 French disaster unfolds
What such a failure meant for French forces in Belgium and Northeast France

36 Fighting retreat to Dunkirk
How the BEF continued, despite the weight of enemy assaults

40 Key player: John Vereker (Lord Gort)
The BEF commander who had to either let down Allies or risk his army's destruction

28

40

36

22

PREPARING FOR THE GERMAN INVASION

THE BEF MADE THE MOST OF THE PRELUDE TO THE GERMAN ATTACK WITH TRAINING, MANOEUVRES AND A HERCULEAN ENTRENCHING EFFORT

WORDS BY WILLIAM E WELSH

As German bombs and artillery shells rained down on Warsaw in September 1939, elements of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) boarded troopships in Southampton and Bristol bound for the deepwater ports of Normandy. Six months earlier, the leaders of France and Britain had pledged that they would come to Poland's aid if it was attacked by Nazi Germany. In the preceding three years, the Rhineland, Austria and Czechoslovakia had fallen to the Germans without bloodshed. This time it was different. The German blitzkrieg was killing Poles by the thousands.

The Poles desperately needed Britain and France to honour their pledge to open a second front in Western Europe. The French had promised to attack the Siegfried Line within 13 days following the German invasion of Poland. As for the British, they had vowed to conduct a bombing offensive against Germany.

Britain and France entered the war two days after the Germans crossed the Polish border on 1 September. The two constitutional governments declared war even though London and Paris actually had no intention of honouring these pledges. Their threats to declare war had been bluffs in an effort to compel German leader Adolf Hitler to cancel his invasion plans.

When the French failed to launch their attack after 13 days, the Poles were shocked. They felt deeply betrayed. On 27 September, Poland surrendered to Germany. The Nazis had conquered Poland in just four weeks.

The British had only begun planning for war in March 1939, when they had made their

Soldiers of the BEF embark for France, where they will deploy on the Franco-Belgian border

promise to come to Poland's aid. At the outset of the BEF build up, the French and British had neither an offensive or defensive strategy in place. Nevertheless, the British government immediately began sending troops to France. The first of many large troop convoys containing British regular army units embarked on 9 September 1939.

The British War Ministry entrusted command of the BEF to 53-year-old general Lord Gort. Although lacking the flash of brilliance that some of the German generals possessed, there was no question of Gort's courage under fire. While the Germany army rested and refitted following its whirlwind invasion of Poland, Britain steadily built up its forces in France for the anticipated German invasion.

The Americans coined the phrase Phoney War to describe the eight-month period in which no major offensive was launched by either side on the continent, even though Britain clashed with Germany in Norway and on the open sea. During this time, the British focused on updating equipment and training troops.

"THE AMERICANS COINED THE PHRASE PHONEY WAR TO DESCRIBE THE EIGHT-MONTH PERIOD IN WHICH NO MAJOR OFFENSIVE WAS LAUNCHED BY EITHER SIDE ON THE CONTINENT"

CLOSING THE READINESS GAP

The British struggled desperately during the Phoney War to close the modernisation gap with Hitler's high-tech war machine. British factories and plants began producing modern tanks, anti-tank weapons and aircraft as fast as possible. It was a daunting undertaking.

Each British infantry brigade had an anti-tank platoon. At the time of deployment, these platoons lacked anti-tank weapons capable of knocking out the German tanks that had so easily overrun Polish forces. What the British needed were more towed anti-tank weapons, such as the QF 2-pounder Mark IX, rather than the widely issued Boys Anti-Tank Rifles. The same deficiencies held true for the BEF's armoured units. The British Mark I and Mark VI light tanks had as their main armament a .303-calibre machine gun. But the British desperately needed tanks mounting 2-pounder (40mm) guns. Gort initially refused to deploy elements of the British 1st Armoured Division to France until more of its light tanks had been replaced with Mark II (Matilda) medium tanks with the 2-pounder gun. Gort eventually would approve its deployment, and two brigades of the 1st Armoured Division arrived in Le Havre in time for the German attack. One tank brigade had Mark VI tanks with the .303-calibre machine gun and a .55-calibre machine gun, and the other tank brigade had Mark II tanks with the 2-pounder gun.

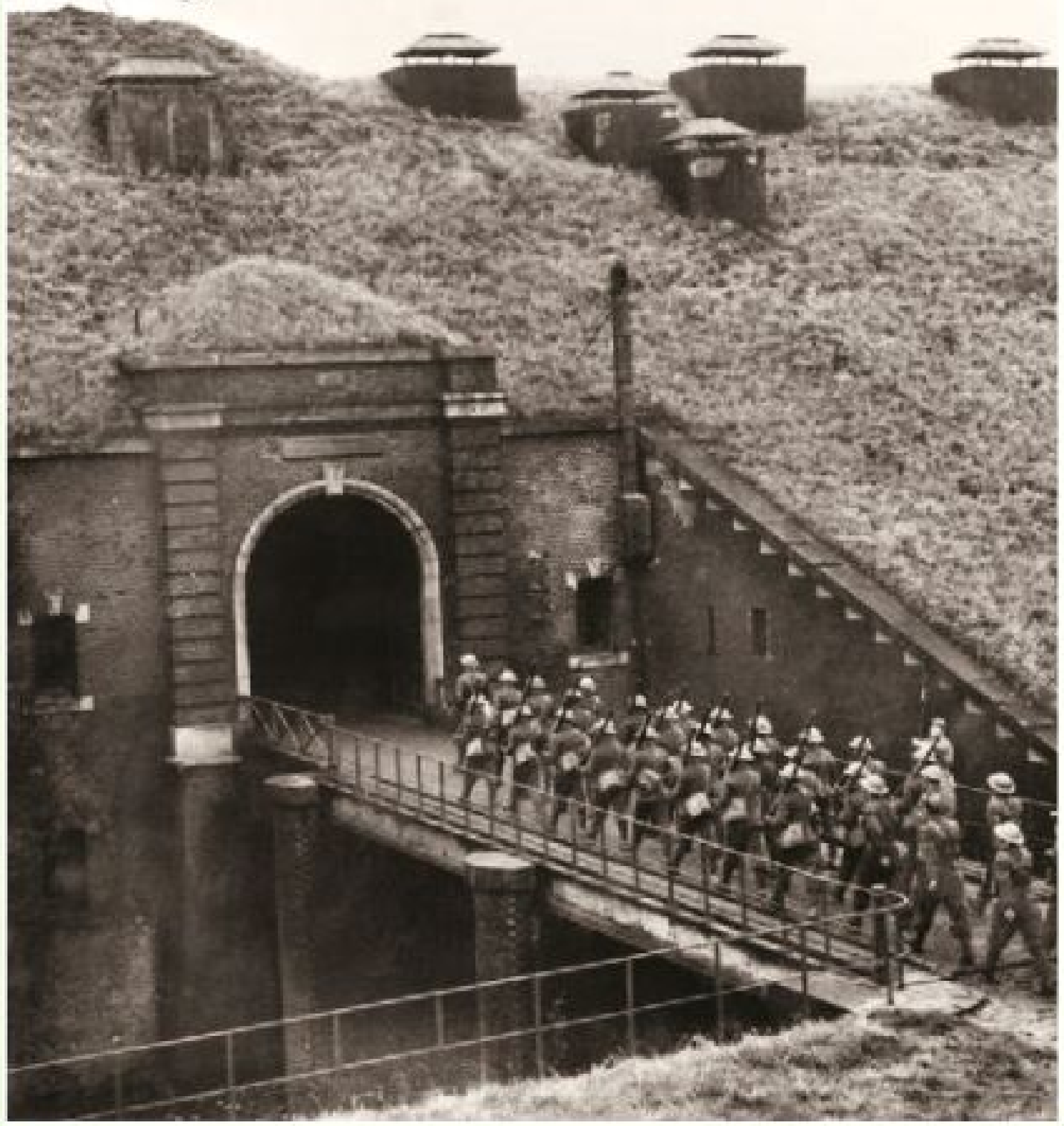
By 12 October, the BEF had five divisions of its regular army deployed on the Franco-Belgian border east of Lille where they kept busy with field exercises and weapons training. The highly touted Maginot Line, which the French had built to prevent the Germans from launching a blitzkrieg attack across its border with Germany on the eastern frontier of Alsace and Lorraine, only extended to the Belgian border.

Both armies eagerly awaited shipments of new tanks and planes. Even though both France and Britain had switched to a wartime footing, it would take time to produce new tanks

Lord Gort (left) and Lieutenant General Henry Pownall study troop positions on a map at BEF headquarters in France, November 1939

DANGEROUS DUTY ON THE MAGINOT LINE

BEF troops rotated through the Maginot Line, gaining valuable combat experience



Soldiers of the 51st Highland Division march across a drawbridge into Fort de Sainghain on the Maginot Line in November 1939

The Phoney War involved real combat for some of the British Expeditionary Force units sent to France during the eight-month period preceding the German attack on 10 May 1940. Although the majority of the British soldiers awaiting the German attack were in no immediate danger, that could not be said for those whose units rotated through the Maginot Line.

Lord Gort issued an order in November 1939 requiring each British brigade to serve for a short period of time alongside the French on the Maginot Line to gain combat experience. In those areas where the Maginot Line and the German Siegfried Line ran closely parallel to each other, the French citizens had abandoned their homes. This left the strip of land just inside the French border a dangerous no-man's land where Allied and German patrols frequently collided.

The French had built the Maginot Line strongpoints at intervals, but troops patrolled between the strongpoints to prevent infiltration. The British units serving on the Maginot Line conducted regular reconnaissance patrols both day and night.

Gort transferred the entire British 51st (Highland) Infantry Division to the French Third Army on 22 April to help reinforce the sector. The Highland Division was deployed on the north end of the line 20 miles east of Thionville in close proximity to the Siegfried Line. As the date for the launch of the German invasion in the west grew closer, Generaloberst Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb's Army Group C, which occupied the Siegfried Line, stepped up its harassment of the forces opposite the Highland Division to deceive the Allies into believing an attack against the Maginot Line was imminent.

During this period, the fighting expanded to include battalion-sized encounters. For example, on 7 May, German forces encircled the 4th Battalion of the Royal Highland Regiment at the village of Betting. The 4th Battalion narrowly avoided being wiped out by enemy infantry supported by artillery; it was rescued by reinforcements in the nick of time.

The Phoney War stalemate gave British troops, such as the Royal Hussars, time to complete unfinished training

and planes in sufficient quantity to meet the Germans on equal terms.

CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

Because France and Belgium were on friendly terms, the French thought it impertinent to fortify their common border. But if the Germans chose to violate Belgian neutrality again, as they had done in World War I, it behooved the forces on the northern end of the Allied line to entrench. For that reason, the BEF troops began the herculean task of fortifying their positions around Lille.

When they were not drilling, the BEF troops spent their time constructing concrete pillboxes, anti-tank ditches and wire obstacles in their sector. They also built airstrips for the forward deployment of British fighter aircraft. Because far more troops were needed, the War Ministry began calling up territorial divisions to join the regular infantry divisions already deployed. British territorial units arrived in France throughout the winter. Since they were under-strength and inadequately equipped, three of the territorial divisions were designated for line-of-communication duty. This meant that they performed various kinds of support work that was needed in order to keep the combat units supplied.

By March 1940, the BEF had five regular and eight territorial infantry divisions. Of the 394,000 British soldiers on French soil, 237,000 were considered battle-ready frontline troops. In contrast, the French had 2.5 million men under arms organised into 97 divisions. But the British made up for their small numbers with their level of activity.

The people of France and Britain were ambivalent about going to war in 1939, which was a marked departure from the hoopla associated with the entry of the two great powers into World War I, a quarter of a century earlier. In the case of France, this lack of enthusiasm transferred to the French armed forces, which – unlike the British – did not have the desire to undertake regular training and manoeuvres. While the French seemed content to sit and wait for the Germans to attack during the Phoney War, the British were constantly drilling and practising. For example, the BEF units practised road movement so that they would be able to advance and withdraw with speed and precision once the fighting began.

Early in the Phoney War, the Allies had established a Supreme War Council to conduct joint planning and coordinate strategy between the French and British forces. As the Phoney War dragged on, the top generals deceived themselves into believing that Hitler would allow them as much time as they needed to prepare for inevitable German attack.

General Maurice Gamelin, commander-in-chief of French Armed Forces, naively believed that the Allies might be able to avoid a major war in the west until 1941 or 1942 when they had finished modernising their forces. Gamelin even hoped to avoid war altogether. He believed that the British naval blockade might ultimately compel the German people to overthrow Hitler.

The civilian leaders of France and Britain spent a great deal of time dreaming up grandiose offensive plans that would never come to fruition. The French wanted desperately to prevent the main battle in the west from occurring on their soil. They advocated an offensive in Scandinavia to deny Germany the iron ore it received from Sweden, and a strategic bombing offensive to knock out the oil fields in the Caucasus region of the Soviet Union, from which Germany imported 90 per cent of its petrol.

The Allied politicians and generals failed to realise that the lack of a clear offensive strategy for defeating Germany was having a corrosive effect on public morale. Many French and British citizens believed it had been imprudent to declare war on Germany when forces were not ready for full-scale conflict.

DOUBTS OVER FRENCH READINESS

For the French troops, the majority of whom were conscripts and reserves, the lack of activity led to a severe drop in morale. British officers and soldiers were shocked by the undisciplined behaviour of the French troops. Many British soldiers harboured doubts that the French were up to the daunting task of defeating the Germans. The French generals made no effort to improve the behaviour of the green troops, and they were allowed to behave in an unmilitary manner that shocked the British. “Seldom have I seen anything more slovenly,” said British II Corps Commander Alan Brooke of the French Ninth Army.

In many respects, the BEF used its time wisely in the eight months leading up to the German attack in May 1940. By the time the Germans finally attacked, the British troops had constructed 59 airfields, 400 pillboxes, 40 miles of anti-tank ditches and hundreds of miles of railroad.

On 9 April 1940, the Germans invaded Denmark and Norway. Although the Allies intervened militarily, they were unable to reverse German gains. The incompetent way British forces were handled led to prime minister Neville Chamberlain’s resignation on 10 May, and his replacement by First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill. On that same day, the Germans attacked in the west.

Guderian will be remembered for being driven, headstrong and somewhat quarrelsome

KEY PLAYER

HEINZ GUDERIAN

FAST HEINZ'S PANZERS POWERED TOWARDS THE COAST, SHOCKING THE ALLIES AND HIS SUPERIORS

If there is an entirely appropriate single word to sum up the character of Heinz Guderian, it is 'driven'. He earnestly studied theories of motorised armoured warfare from around the world, formulating a method of attack that earned him various descriptions such as 'the father of the panzer divisions' and 'the father of the blitzkrieg'. Then he ruthlessly put his ideas into practice as a relentless World War II battlefield commander in Poland, western Europe and the Soviet Union.

Heinz Wilhelm Guderian was born on 17 June 1888 in Kulm, at the heart of the Old German Empire (now Chełmno, Poland). The son of an army officer, he entered a military school in 1901 before graduating from the Metz military academy in 1908. He was commissioned as a lieutenant and trained with the Signal Corps. At the beginning of World War I, he undertook signals work and staff assignments, allowing him to learn about strategic planning and large-scale battle operations. While his postings were not directly on the front line, he saw action when his positions came under attack, and he received the Iron Cross first and second class for defending them.

14 MAY 1940

After Guderian's XIX Corps sliced through defences at Sedan, the French army never recovered from the blow to its morale. It was beyond those in command to rally troops to launch a counter-attack. In contrast, the man guiding the panzers was so bold he became known as 'Fast Heinz'.

Headstrong and quarrelsome, Guderian often clashed with his superiors – a recurring theme throughout his military career – though he was considered an officer of great promise. He had reached the rank of captain when hostilities ceased, yet – like a number of others in the army – he bitterly resented his nation's decision to surrender, believing that they should have fought on.

Only 4,000 officers were allowed to stay in the Reichswehr that formed the German army after the war, and Guderian was one of them. Yet the immediate post-war years in the nation were turbulent, with differing factions struggling for control. A fierce anti-communist, Guderian fought with the Freikorps against the Bolsheviks, as the revolutionaries threatened to spread their ideology across Europe.

Eventually, Guderian joined the Truppenamt, or Troop Office, which was effectively the army's general staff, even though such a grouping was forbidden by the Treaty of Versailles. By 1927, a newly promoted major, Guderian transferred to the Truppenamt group for army transport and motorised tactics. This role placed him at the centre of development of German armoured forces.

He studied extensively, harvesting the ideas of British and French mobile warfare theorists, such as JFC Fuller and the then little-known Charles de Gaulle, and adding these to his own. The concept he came up with was for spearhead units of tanks supported by motorised infantry and armour to force breakthroughs in enemy lines that could be quickly exploited to create sustained rapid advances – the essence of blitzkrieg.

Further promotions followed as Guderian continued honing his theories, and circulating them in a number of papers on mechanised warfare. Inevitably, he came to the attention of Adolf Hitler. Ignoring Treaty of Versailles stipulations on re-arming, the German chancellor created three panzer divisions, and Guderian was given command of the second. Promoted to major general in 1936, a year later he published his most important work, *Achtung – Panzer!* In this book, his ideas of mobile warfare were fully formed, including how air power should work in support of the ground assault, and how important radio

communication was between the various components of the attacking force.

His star still rising, Guderian was made chief of Fast Troops, meaning that he was responsible for recruiting, organising and training the army's motorised and armoured troops as the build-up to World War II began. When Germany invaded Poland, the XIX Army Motorised Corps were under Guderian's command. Putting his theories into devastating practice, it was this unit that penetrated deepest into Polish territory.

However, it was the attacks west – into Holland, Belgium and France – that saw blitzkrieg unleashed at its most effective and destructive. The operation began on 10 May 1940. The Allies, including the British Expeditionary Force, pressed forward into Belgium to meet the invading threat of German Army Group B. Much further south, Army Group C advanced on French defences of the Maginot Line. Yet it was Army Group A, incorporating Guderian's XIX Corps, that launched the most surprising attack, ghosting surreptitiously through the presumed impenetrable wooded terrain of the Ardennes.

Key to the success of the plan was swiftly crossing the River Meuse. Guderian promised to reach it at Sedan in four days. He actually got there in three. Given an attack in the area was thought so unlikely, it was poorly defended. Some resistance was offered but it was no match for co-ordinated air attacks, augmented by sustained artillery and tank fire that allowed the infantry and specialist engineers to cross the river and construct pontoon bridges for the panzer vehicles. Sedan fell, and the Allied defensive line was split.

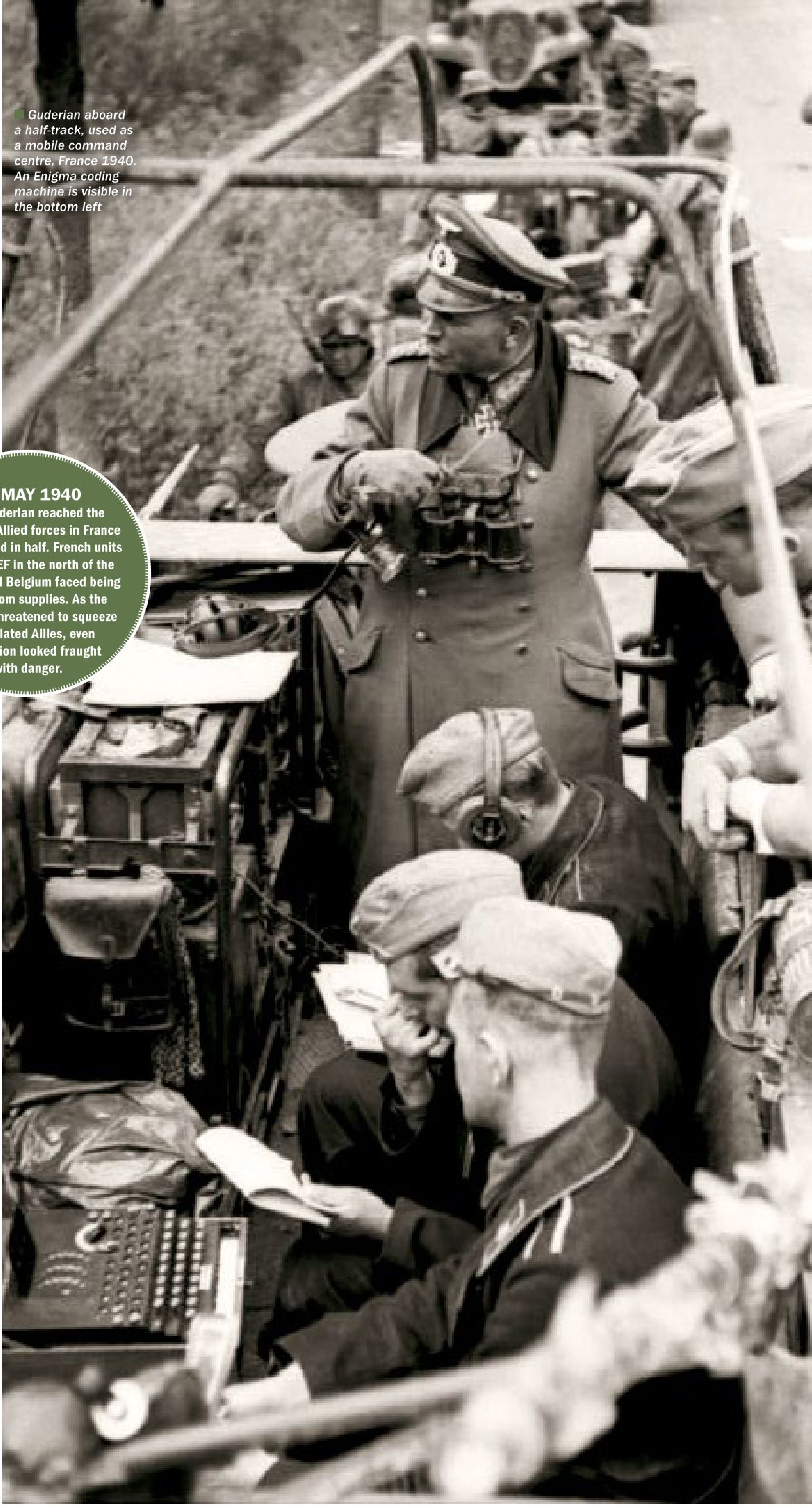
The French interior lay ahead of Guderian. He pressed forward at startling speed to inflict damage and disruption to Allied rear areas in a headlong dash for the coast. At Montcornet, the German advance ironically encountered tank resistance from de Gaulle's Fourth Armoured Division, but the isolated counter by someone Guderian had previously studied faltered through lack of support.

If the charge forward shook the Allies, it also disturbed Guderian's superiors. Their fears were that in pushing on too far and too fast, the supply lines to tanks spearheading the thrust would be stretched too thin, and that flanks either side of the column would be opened up to counter-attacks. General von Rundstedt, commanding Army Group A, ordered a halt on 16 May. Guderian's immediate superior, General Kleist, reached his junior officer and instructed him to comply with the order. In typically headstrong fashion, Guderian threatened to resign, and instead confidently kept moving. Powering through resistance at Albert, Amiens and Abbeville, his unit reached the coast at Noyelles on 20 May. The Allied forces in the north had been cut off from those in the south.

Guderian then swept along the Channel coastline. By 24 May, he was near Gravelines, just ten miles from Dunkirk, when another order to halt was sent. This one was harder to ignore, as it was endorsed by Hitler himself.

20 MAY 1940

Once Guderian reached the coast, the Allied forces in France were severed in half. French units and the BEF in the north of the country and Belgium faced being cut off from supplies. As the Germans threatened to squeeze the isolated Allies, even evacuation looked fraught with danger.



Guderian aboard a half-track, used as a mobile command centre, France 1940. An Enigma coding machine is visible in the bottom left

■ *Guderian in the middle of the 'Funkpanzerwagen' in conversation with General Adolf Kuntzen in France, May 1940*

24 MAY 1940

Though endorsed by Hitler, the order to pause panzer advances originated with General Gerd von Rundstedt, who wanted to allow the infantry to catch up with the 'fast troops'. Had Guderian been allowed to swoop on Dunkirk, however, the consequences for the evacuation may have been dire.

"THE FRENCH INTERIOR LAY AHEAD OF GUDERIAN. HE PRESSED FORWARD AT STARTLING SPEED TO INFLICT DAMAGE AND DISRUPTION TO ALLIED REAR AREAS IN A HEADLONG DASH FOR THE COAST"

The panzers stood still for two days, a crucial period for the Allies to reinforce defences around Dunkirk in preparation for Operation Dynamo. When the resume order came, it revealed the final assault on the evacuating Allies was to be made by the Luftwaffe; the panzers were to be diverted south, saving them for the thrust towards Paris and the final conquest of France. That came on 22 June 1940 when the country signed an armistice with Germany.

Promoted again, the now Generaloberst (colonel general) Guderian commanding what had become Panzergruppe 2 was dispatched east in 1941 as Hitler opened up a second front against the Soviet Union. Operation Barbarossa once again employed blitzkrieg tactics to devastating effect against the Red Army. Guderian was set to rapidly advance on Moscow when Hitler interfered again, diverting him to take Kiev. Disagreeing, he protested the order but nevertheless eventually complied. Valuable time was lost, meaning the German forces were not able to approach Moscow until autumn was out. Redoubtable Red Army resistance and a viciously cold winter brought the German advance to a halt. In the face of a Russian counter-attack, and expressly against his Führer's wishes, Guderian conducted a strategic retreat. It was one act of defiance too far, and he was dismissed just before the turn of the year.

A redemption of sorts came when Hitler recalled Guderian as inspector-general of the Armoured Troops in the spring of 1943. In this role, Guderian both rationalised and dramatically expanded German armoured production to restore some of the panzer arm's lost combat power.

The day after the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler in July 1944, Guderian was made chief of staff of the army. Yet while this showed he had regained the Führer's trust, Guderian argued with him again in March 1945, and was effectively dismissed for the final time when sent on extended 'medical leave'.

On 10 May 1945, five years to the day after blitzkrieg was unleashed on Holland, Belgium and France to startling effect, the man considered by many to be its principle architect surrendered to US forces. Guderian was held as a prisoner of war for three years while his war conduct was investigated, then released when no charges were brought against him. He died aged 65 in 1954.

ICONIC MOMENT

Motorised ground forces sweep forward rapidly to gain ground as General Heinz Guderian watches, almost paternally. The panzer and light divisions were key to Germany's success in pushing back French and British forces.

WORDS BY WILLIAM E WELSH

A FATALLY FLAWED PLAN

ALTHOUGH THE BRITISH CARRIED OUT A SKILFUL ADVANCE TO THE RIVER DYLE, GERMAN ARMOUR CROSSED THE MEUSE RIVER INTO THE ALLIED REAR

In the early afternoon of 10 May 1940, the men of the 12th Royal Lancers Regiment climbed into their armoured scout cars and roared into Belgium. Following the Lancers were the carriers and light tanks of British cavalry regiments. The mission of these fast-moving units was to drive as quickly as possible 110 kilometres to the Dyle river and hold a position on the west bank of it until the infantry brigades of Lord Gort's British Expeditionary Force arrived to replace them.

Although the Belgians had not permitted the French and British entry into their country to coordinate defensive measures against the Germans – in an effort by the Belgians to avoid angering the aggressors or giving them an excuse to invade – the Allies had drawn up detailed plans for what they would do when the Belgians requested their aid.

The French and British general staffs had created two possible scenarios for defending Belgium. The Escaut Plan called for the Allies to advance to the Scheldt (also called Escaut) river and defend a line that extended from the Franco-Belgian border to Antwerp. The Dyle Plan called for the Allies to advance deeper into Belgium and take up a position on the Dyle river. French commander-in-chief Maurice Gamelin introduced afterwards what was known as the Breda Variant, by which the French 7th Army would deploy on the extreme Allied left flank in order to gain control of the mouth of the Scheldt river for supply purposes.

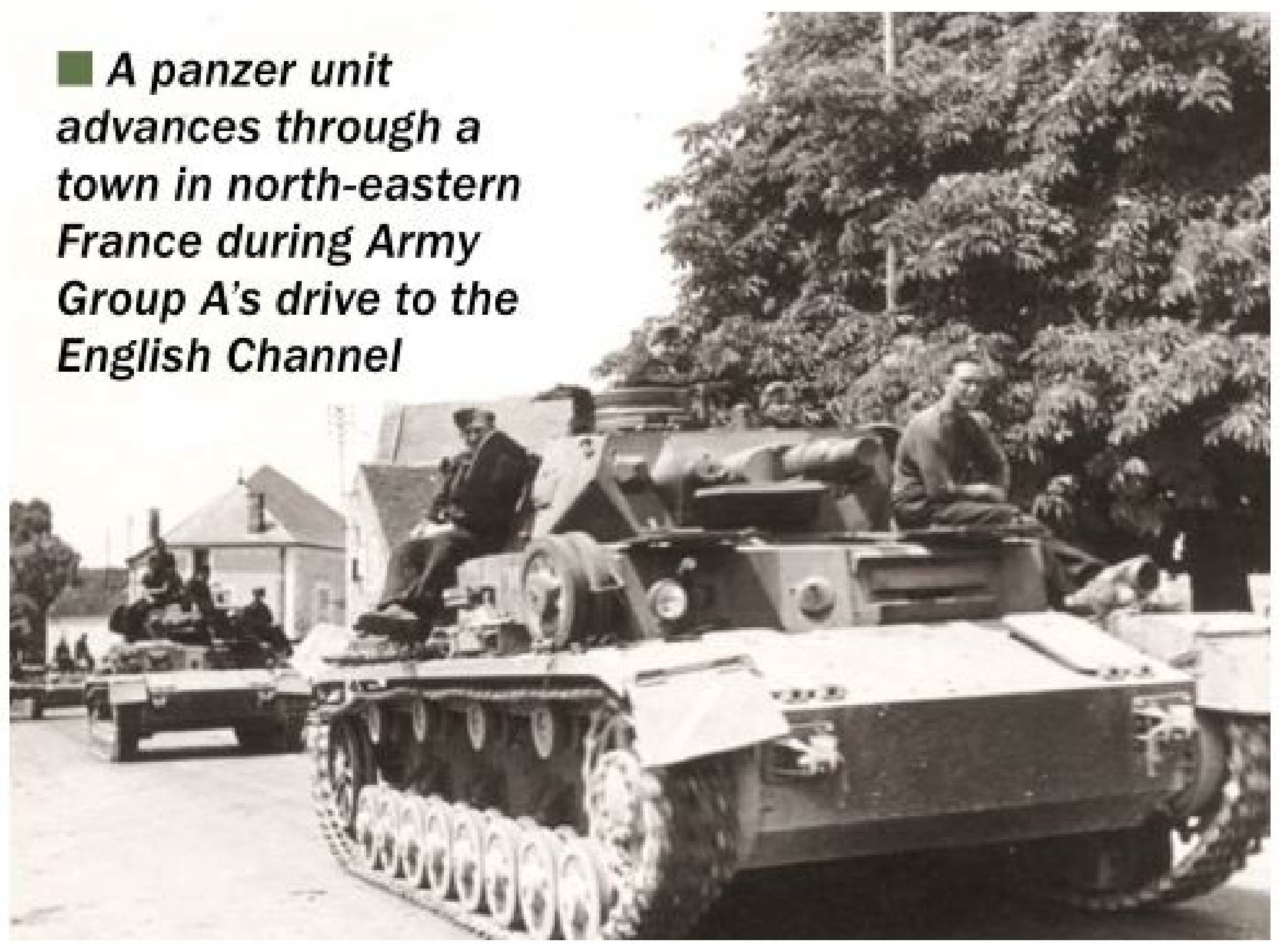
Because of their belief that the Germans were unlikely to attack France's heavily fortified Maginot Line, which ran from the Franco-Swiss border to Longuyon, France, the Allies assumed the Germans would violate Belgian neutrality to reach France. Eager to fight on Belgium's soil as long

“AFTER THE THIRD REICH’S WHIRLWIND CONQUEST OF POLAND IN SEPTEMBER 1939, GERMAN LEADER ADOLF HITLER TURNED HIS ATTENTION TO DEFEATING FRANCE WITH A SIMILAR BLITZKRIEG ATTACK”

■ *General Heinz Guderian’s panzer troops cross a pontoon bridge over the Meuse river near Sedan during Army Group A’s advance through the Ardennes mountains*

"THE MOST CHALLENGING TASK FOR THE SEVEN PANZER DIVISIONS OF RUNDSTEDT'S ARMY GROUP WOULD BE TO CROSS THE MEUSE RIVER"

A British mechanised column rolls through the deserted streets of Leuthen on the Dyle river as part of the BEF's attempt to contain the German attack in May 1940



A panzer unit advances through a town in north-eastern France during Army Group A's drive to the English Channel

British troops pass Belgian citizens fleeing with their possessions from the advancing Germans

British troops in Belgium during the Battle of France display the wreckage of a German Heinkel He 111 medium bomber shot down near Tournai

as possible, Gamelin ordered Allied forces to implement Dyle Plan Breda Variant on the first day of the invasion.

After the Third Reich's whirlwind conquest of Poland in September 1939, German leader Adolf Hitler turned his attention to defeating France with a similar blitzkrieg attack. A blitzkrieg is an offensive conducted with lightning speed by mechanised forces in concert with close air support in an effort to produce a swift victory. When the Germans finally launched their long-awaited blitzkrieg in the west, the Belgians immediately sought help for their 600,000-man army, and the Allies promptly came to their aid.

PLANNING CASE YELLOW

As soon as the Battle of Poland was over, Hitler tasked the German Army Supreme High Command with devising a plan, code-named Case Yellow, for the immediate conquest of the Low Countries and France. The German general staff submitted a plan to Hitler in 1940 that was remarkably unimaginative. The plan called for Colonel General Fedor von Bock's Army Group B to launch the main attack through northern Belgium and into north-eastern France. It would be supported by an additional attack conducted by Colonel General Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group A through the forested Ardennes region of southern Belgium and Luxembourg into north-eastern France. German chief of staff General Fritz Halder had serious reservations about the timing of the attack. He urged Hitler to delay the attack until spring 1940 so that the German army would have time to replace men and equipment lost fighting the Polish.

Rundstedt had shared the plan with Lieutenant General Erich von Manstein, his chief of staff. Manstein believed the plan was doomed to failure because the Allies would be expecting an attack through Belgium, and consequently send their best forces to stop it. Manstein believed a much better plan would be for Army Group A to make the main attack through the Ardennes, while Army Group B launched a secondary attack designed to draw the best Allied forces into Belgium where they would be cut off.

German intelligence knew that the stretch of the French border adjacent to the Belgian Ardennes was unfortified and manned by the weak French 2nd Army composed of second-rate troops. Manstein believed that his plan would enable the Germans to cut off the Allied forces in Belgium and annihilate them. The German general staff initially dismissed it.

Although Manstein had introduced his plan shortly after the original Case Yellow plan, he did not get a chance to brief Hitler on it until 17 February. Hitler immediately realised that Manstein had created an inspired, almost perfect plan for the defeat of the Allies. Manstein's final plan called Army Group A to have 45 divisions, Army Group B to have 29 divisions, and Colonel General Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb's Army Group C to have 17 divisions. Army Group C would be deployed opposite the Maginot Line. Army Group A would have seven of the nine

THE MECHELEN INCIDENT

When the German plan for Case Yellow fell into Allied hands, the Germans discarded it in favour of a better one

As German pilot Major Erich Hoenmanns approached Cologne from the south in his scout plane on 10 January 1940, the aircraft was enveloped by a thick fog. He turned west in an effort to skirt it. A short time later, his engine sputtered and then stopped. He had no choice but to land immediately. The most likely explanation was that he had inadvertently hit the lever that controlled the flow of fuel to the engine.

Hoenmanns guided the aircraft to a landing on snow-covered ground. He and his sole occupant, Major Helmuth Reinberger, who was carrying a dispatch containing the operational plan for Case Yellow for delivery to the 7th Parachute Division headquarters, exited the plane unscathed. A farmer told them they were in Mechelen-sur-Meuse, Belgium, not in Germany. Belgian soldiers whisked them away.

Top-secret plans for the German invasion of France fell into Allied hands when a Messerschmitt Bf 108 aircraft went off course in January 1940

The Mechelen Incident, as it became known, posed a major problem for Belgian King Leopold. He had gone to great lengths to maintain Belgium's neutrality, and he wanted to do nothing to provoke the Germans. Leopold decided he would secretly share the plans with France and Britain. He also would inform the Germans that the Belgians had recovered a copy of the Case Yellow plan.

When Hitler learned of the affair, he was uncharacteristically calm. He ordered the supreme high command of the German Army to scrap the compromised plan and devise a new one.

Hitler had learned in November 1939 that Lieutenant General Erich von Manstein, a gifted army staff officer, had developed a plan by which the main German attack would sweep through the Ardennes region of southern Belgium rather than through north-eastern Belgium as originally intended. "We should let them attack in the direction of Sedan," Hitler told Colonel General Alfred Jodl, the operational chief of the German Armed Forces. "The enemy is not expecting us to attack there."

The Allies showed no inclination to adjust their plans in the wake of the incident. Indeed, they believed that the intercepted plans validated their plan to advance into Belgium to slow the Germans' main attack. The Allies' inability to anticipate a German revision would be their undoing.

> "WHEN HITLER LEARNED OF THE AFFAIR, HE WAS UNCHARACTERISTICALLY CALM"

German armoured divisions. The other two would begin the invasion as part of Army Group A, but eventually be sent south to join Army Group A.

The most challenging task for the seven panzer divisions of Rundstedt's army group would be to cross the Meuse river. Once across the river, Rundstedt's forces would drive for the English Channel. When they reached the Channel, they would achieve what the Germans called a Sichelschnitt, or Sickle Cut, that would slice the Allied army in two and allow army groups A and B to encircle and destroy the Allied forces trapped in south-eastern Belgium and north-eastern France.

DEFENCE OF THE DYLE

Gort ordered eight of his 13 infantry divisions into France following Bock's attack. Their job was to defend a 35-kilometre stretch of the Dyle between Louvain and Wavre in central Belgium. Once the Germans pried the Belgians from their first line of defence on the Albert Canal, the Belgians were to fall back to the Dyle and deploy on the BEF's left flank. The French 1st and 9th armies would deploy on the BEF's right flank. The three French armies, the 1st, 7th, and 9th, and the BEF constituted General Gaston Billotte's First Army Group.

After the war, French high command tried to deflect blame away from itself by declaring that the Ardennes was unsuitable for the passage of a large army group. They cited a comment by then French Minister of War Philippe Pétain in 1934 that the Ardennes was impenetrable. But Pétain had said that it was impenetrable "provided we make some dispositions" for its defence. Although the French tried to fortify the sector in 1939, the work was never completed.

Three British infantry divisions filed into trenches along the Dyle river on 11 May. The other five divisions took up positions at intervals stretching back to the Escaut. On the night of 11-12 May, Belgian soldiers retreated over the Dyle. "All the soldiers looked unkempt, and were unshaven, and the eyes of many where shining and staring as if they had been through a frightening experience," wrote Captain RJ Hastings of the Royal Norfolks.

Oddly, Bock's Germans did not attack the Dyle right away. Instead, he shifted the thrust of his attack south. On 12-13 May, the French and Germans fought a major tank battle at Gembloux Gap. Although the 415 tanks of General René Prioux's French Cavalry Corps succeeded in halting the German advance, it lost the majority of its tanks in the process.

To the south, Rundstedt's Army Group A fought its way across the Meuse on 13-14 May at Dinant and Sedan. On 15 May, Rundstedt's panzer divisions began advancing on a front 80 kilometres wide towards the Channel.

STRONG ASSAULTS

The Germans, on May 15, launched strong attacks against the Dyle line in Belgium. The Germans and British grappled in a series of ferocious firefights. British soldiers fought the Germans with rifles, machine guns and grenades. In some places, German snipers climbed trees to fire down on the British who enjoyed good cover in pre-existing trenches that they had improved.

On the BEF section of the line, the British 3rd division held the left, the 1st division held the centre, and the 2nd division held the right. The entrenched British foot soldiers did their best to defend the line, but it was an impossible task considering the Dyle was no wider than a large stream, and the Germans could easily wade through it.

On the northern end of the line, elements of Major General Bernard Montgomery's 3rd Infantry Division launched counterattacks that drove back German units that had penetrated their line. On the southern end of the British line, the 2nd Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry was stretched thin around the hills where the village of Gastuche was located. At daylight, a group of Germans rushed across a lock and killed every man but one of the platoon defending the position. After hard fighting all morning, Major General HC Lloyd's 2nd Division fell back in the early afternoon to the River Lasne so that its flank would not be endangered by the Germans' successful breach of part of the French 1st Army's line to the south.

As the first day of fighting on the Dyle drew to a close, Gort called Billotte for a situation report. Gort, commanding BEF forces from BEF General Headquarters at Habarcq near Arras, had learned that Billotte had ordered the French forces to fall back. But the commander of the First Army Group had not shown enough presence of mind to apprise the British of the situation. Gort was furious. The following day, Billotte issued the same order to the BEF. The BEF had barely avoided being encircled on the Dyle due to Billotte's shoddy leadership.

ICONIC MOMENT

German soldiers ride on Panzer IV through a town in France. The Panzer IV was the most manufactured tank in the German army and saw use on all fronts throughout World War II.

FRENCH DISASTER UNFOLDS

THE FAILURE OF HIGH COMMAND TO FORTIFY THE MEUSE LINE LED TO CATASTROPHE FOR FRENCH FORCES IN BELGIUM AND NORTH-EASTERN FRANCE

WORDS BY WILLIAM E WELSH

The French 1st Armoured Division counterattacked Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel's panzers on 14 May in a vain attempt to slow his advance from the Meuse

On the plain of central Belgium, French tank commanders watched nervously on 12 May as two German panzer divisions assembled on the horizon for an attack. Soon, their view of the enemy was obscured by a massive, swirling cloud of dust that engulfed German tanks as they rumbled into the Gembloux Gap to engage French forces anchoring the Allied right flank.

The German attack at Gembloux Gap was meant to inflict significant damage to General René Prioux's French Cavalry Corps, and to render it less of a threat in the days to follow. Prioux's tank crews blunted the German advance, but at a cost of approximately 70 French light and medium tanks in the opening clash. The German panzer forces in Belgium rested on 14 May, and struck anew the following day. Although Prioux's tank crews once again fought the Germans to a standstill, he received orders that day to begin withdrawing to the west.

General Gaston Billotte, the commander-in-chief of the First Army Group in Belgium, had issued the orders for a general withdrawal of Allied forces in Belgium after learning that a massive German panzer army had swept through the Ardennes region of southern Belgium and bridged the River Meuse. After two days of fighting along the Meuse, on 15 May, the Germans broke out of their bridgeheads and began advancing rapidly across the rolling hills west of the river. Their advance outflanked French forces in Belgium, and Billotte knew it was imperative to pull back his overexposed army group.

The powerful German attack through the Ardennes stunned French civilian and military leaders alike, and prompted French president Albert Lebrun to replace French supreme commander Maurice Gamelin with Maxime Weygand on 18 May. Gamelin was ousted because he had failed to take precautions against a German invasion through the

Second-rate French forces defending the Meuse line were overrun by German panzer regiments that swept through small towns such as Château-Porcien

“THE BELEAGUERED FRENCH 1ST ARMY SUFFERED STAGGERING LOSSES IN ITS FIGHTING RETREAT WEST THROUGH BELGIUM. SOME UNITS SUFFERED 75 PER CENT CASUALTIES”

Ardennes by adequately fortifying that section of the Franco-Belgian border before and during the Phoney War.

Colonel General Gerd von Rundstedt’s armoured thrust through the Ardennes had the good fortune of striking the seam between the French 9th and 2nd Armies. Both armies were composed of poor-quality reservist troops. The news of the collapse of the two armies plunged the French Army’s Northeast Front headquarters into a state of despondency from which it would not recover. The sense of gloom and foreboding transferred as if by electrical current from Northeast Front headquarters to the War Ministry in Paris.

NORTHEAST FRONT COLLAPSES

After two of three French armoured divisions failed to comply with orders to counterattack the Germans, Northeast Front commander General Alphonse Georges issued orders on 15 May to Colonel Charles de Gaulle, commander of the 4th Armoured Division held in reserve, to counterattack the Germans, while Georges set about establishing a new defensive line. De Gaulle spent two days assembling his forces and getting into position for a counterattack.

Meanwhile, General André Corap’s 9th Army was on the verge of collapse. Two of its three corps had simply melted away in the face of the German onslaught, and the bulk of Corap’s troops were in full flight west. What’s more, the movement of French forces, both in their efforts to reform and counterattack, were hampered by the presence on the roads of thousands of civilian refugees fleeing the advancing Germans. German fighter aircraft strafed the roads indiscriminately killing both soldiers and civilians. In doing so, they thwarted French efforts to regroup.

De Gaulle launched two counterattacks, one on 17 May and another on 19 May, against the southern flank of Rundstedt’s advancing panzer divisions, but the French colonel’s tanks went forward unsupported by infantry or aircraft. The following day, General Heinz Guderian’s panzers reached Noyelles-sur-Mere on the English Channel, thus cutting off General Maurice Blanchard’s French 1st Army in Belgium.

Weygand tried his best to stabilise the situation, but the state of affairs had deteriorated too far for him to save the French 1st Army. He pressured the Belgians to extend their line on 21 May, which ultimately resulted in their surrender a week later. He also browbeat BEF commander Lord Gort to launch an armoured counterattack against Rundstedt’s right flank. After the first BEF counterattack failed on 21 May, he scheduled another for 26 May. The deteriorating situation precluded the second attack from occurring.

Weygand made unrealistic promises to both the French and British civilian leaders that it would be possible to open a corridor from the River Somme to the trapped forces in Flanders. His failure to make realistic assessments of the situation was inexcusable.

The beleaguered French 1st Army suffered staggering losses in its fighting retreat west through Belgium. Some units suffered 75 per cent casualties. Nevertheless, the components were the cream of the French army, and therefore their morale remained surprisingly high despite the desperate situation in which they found themselves.

Although British and French vessels ultimately managed to evacuate more than 123,000 French troops from Dunkirk, the 40,000 French soldiers who had been left in the Dunkirk perimeter, and another 40,000 French troops in the Lille pocket, had absolutely no choice but to lay down their arms and march off to German prisoner-of-war camps.

FIGHTING RETREAT TO DUNKIRK

WORDS BY WILLIAM E WELSH

THE HIGHLY DISCIPLINED BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE NEVER BUCKLED UNDER THE WEIGHT OF ENEMY ASSAULTS AS IT FELL BACK THROUGH BELGIUM

When word filtered down to the British soldiers at the front in Belgium on 16 May 1940 that they were to begin withdrawing west in stages from the Dyle river later that evening, the men were stunned and dismayed. The Germans had not penetrated their position in two days of continuous fighting. It was hard for them to understand that the First Army Group Headquarters, to which the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) belonged, had ordered the move because of the disastrous events unfolding 110 kilometres south along the Meuse river. The Germans had punched a hole in the French frontline, therefore outlflanking the Allied forces in Belgium.

When the German invasion of the Low Countries and France began on 10 May 1940, the bulk of the BEF had raced into Belgium to take up strong positions behind the Dyle and await the inevitable German assault. They had to wait five days before the lead elements of Colonel General Fedor von Bock's Army Group B attacked their positions on 15 May.

BEF commander Lord Gort issued orders the very next day that the three infantry divisions deployed on a 35-kilometre section of the Dyle between Wavre and Louvain would fall back in three stages to the Scheldt river. First, they would withdraw to the Senne river, next to the Dendre river, and lastly to the Scheldt. The withdrawal was to proceed in a well-choreographed manner, with the two frontline brigades of each division falling back through their reserve brigade. Then, the reserve brigade would fall back through a screen of armoured cars, machine guns and anti-tank guns. Once the division had reassembled behind the next river, it would repeat the process again.

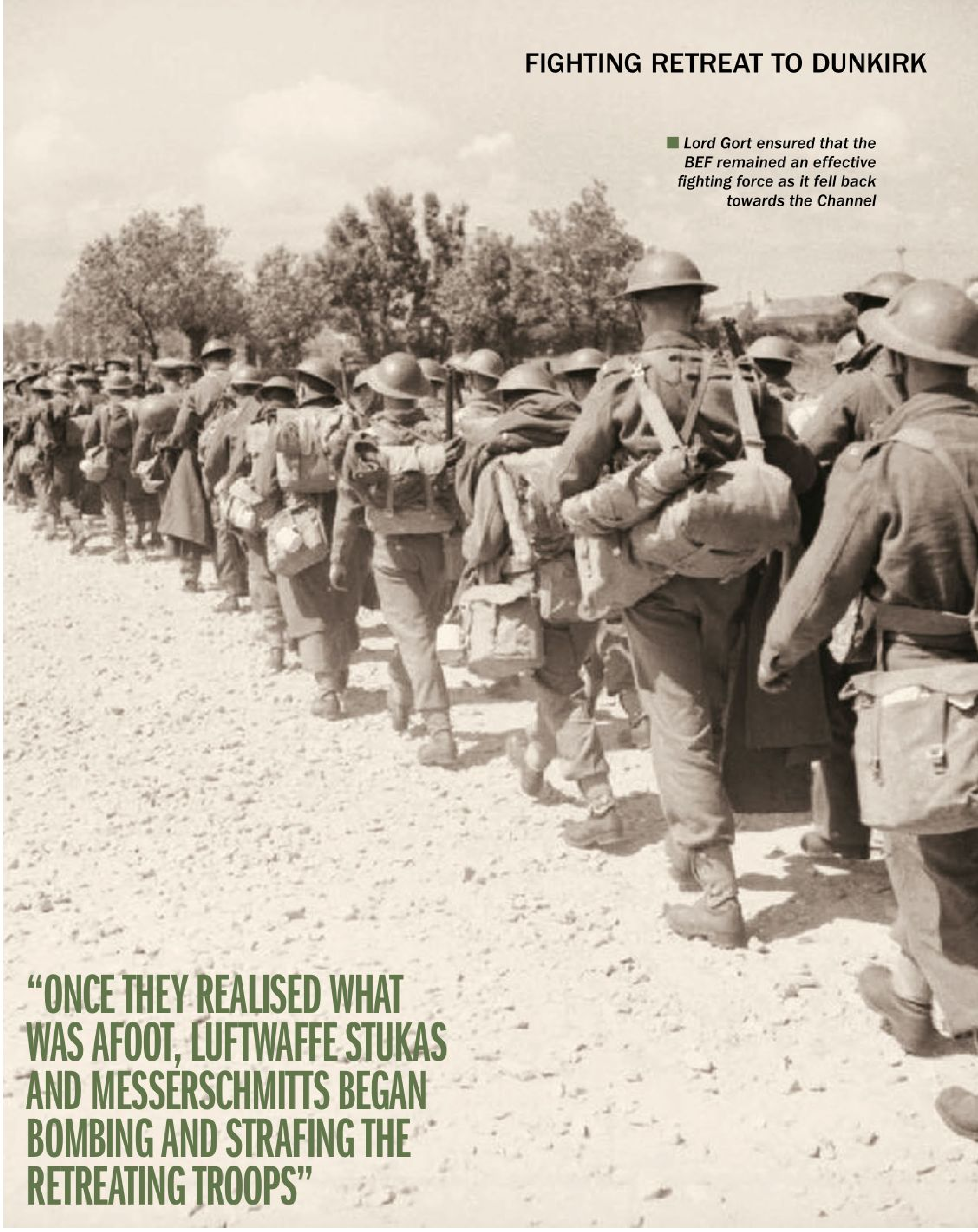
The BEF would be undertaking a 'withdrawal in contact', which is one of the most demanding operations an army can conduct. It requires clear orders, strong hearts and steely discipline. The Germans did not know at first that the British had pulled out. But once they realised what was afoot, Luftwaffe Stukas and Messerschmitts began bombing and strafing the retreating troops.

To guard against the relentless aerial harassment, the British generally hunkered in place during the daytime and moved under cover of night. Along the routes of withdrawal were scattered blackened British military vehicles shot up by enemy air or ground fire. The sleep-deprived soldiers tramped west while the pursuing Germans nipped at their heels. To the credit of the regular army units, the leapfrogging retreat was carried out calmly and with a precision only possible by professional soldiers who belonged to well-led units with an esprit-de-corps.

LACK OF RESERVES

On 15 May, French premier Paul Reynaud rang Churchill with bad news about the Meuse

■ *Prime minister Winston Churchill agreed to transfer four more Hawker Hurricane squadrons to France in response to French pleas on 15 May*



■ *Lord Gort ensured that the BEF remained an effective fighting force as it fell back towards the Channel*

"ONCE THEY REALISED WHAT WAS AFOOT, LUFTWAFFE STUKAS AND MESSERSCHMITTS BEGAN BOMBING AND STRAFING THE RETREATING TROOPS"

sector. "We are beaten; we have lost the battle," he said. "The front is broken near Sedan." Churchill was taken back. He agreed to fly to Paris to consult on the situation with French civilian and military leaders. On 16 May, in Paris, Churchill inquired as to the status of the strategic reserve. Allied Supreme Commander Maurice Gamelin told him there was none. Reynaud pled with Churchill to fulfil his promise to furnish an additional ten fighter squadrons to France to contest the Luftwaffe's air superiority. Churchill agreed to transfer four immediately, but the other six would operate from southern England in order to not compromise the home country's air defences.

First Army Group Commander General Gaston Billotte communicated only minimally with Gort during the first week of the war. Billotte, who was responsible for coordinating the operations of the four French armies and the BEF tasked with defending both Belgium and north-eastern France, put nearly all of his energy into directing his French forces.

Gort had a total of 13 infantry divisions under his command, but only ten were combat ready. The other three, which were inexperienced and under-equipped, were known as Lines of Communication (LOC) divisions. When the BEF marched in to Belgium on the first day of the invasion, the three LOC divisions were left behind in upper France where they guarded airfields, depots and the roads over which supplies flowed to the front-line forces.

As the German attack developed, the LOC divisions found themselves in grave danger as they were situated directly in the path of Colonel General Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group A, which was advancing through north-eastern France towards the English Channel in order to cut off the Allied forces in Belgium. The vanguard of Army Group A consisted of fast-moving panzer forces.

As the campaign developed, the challenge for Gort was to monitor Bock's forces in front of him to the east, as well as keep a close eye on von Rundstedt's forces closing fast on the rear of his army. The situation went from bad to worse on 20 May. General Heinz Guderian's XIX Corps, which comprised three panzer divisions, destroyed two of the three LOC infantry divisions before reaching Noyelles-sur-Mere on the English Channel. Guderian then wheeled north towards the Channel ports and the rear of the BEF.

On the same day the Germans reached the Channel, the BEF had regrouped behind the Escaut line. The British occupied a 51-kilometre section in the middle of the Escaut line with the Belgians holding the northern end, and the French holding the southern end. The previous day, Gort had broached the idea of an evacuation by sea with the War Office in London. Churchill, who was concerned as to whether Gort was thinking prematurely about an evacuation, sent chief of the imperial general staff Baron William Edmund Ironside to BEF headquarters to assess the situation and consult with Gort on the best course of action. Ironside strongly encouraged Gort to think first and foremost about how he could open a corridor to the Allied forces along the Somme river by counterattacking Rundstedt's army to his south.

Gort objected to the idea of a major counterattack southwards because he would have to strip forces from his left flank in Belgium in order to carry out such an attack.

He feared this would leave a dangerous gap between the British and the Belgians that the Germans would exploit.

BELGIAN DEATH KNELL

French General Maxime Weygand, who replaced Gamelin as Allied supreme commander on 18 May, addressed this very matter in a meeting with the Belgian King Leopold at Ypres on 21 May. Weygand wanted the Belgians to abandon the Escaut line and fall back to the Yser river, which was the westernmost river in Belgium. This would shorten the Allied line and free up British forces for future counterattacks against Rundstedt's so-called Panzer Corridor, which stretched from the Meuse to the English Channel. The withdrawal would, however, compel the Belgians to abandon most of western Belgium to the enemy, leaving behind valuable stockpiles of food and ammunition, essential to the survival of the Belgian army. King Leopold, who was the commander-in-chief of the Belgian army, argued that it also would further damage the precarious state of Belgian morale.

Weygand and Leopold reached a compromise in which the Belgians would fall back to the Lys river and also extend their line south to assist the British. In so doing, Leopold committed his last reserves to relieve British forces shifting south. The compromise agreement benefited the British, but it was the death knell for a Belgian army that was on the brink of collapse. The Belgians withdrew from the Scheldt to the Lys, and the British fell back from the Scheldt to the Deule river, taking up a position between Lens and Lille to protect Dunkirk.

Gort had ordered a limited counterattack by British armour at Arras on 21 May, but it had failed to dent Rundstedt's Panzer Corridor. Weygand pushed for another counterattack, but by then Gort was convinced an evacuation by sea was the only way the BEF would escape destruction. Weygand assured Churchill that forces could be mustered for another counterattack, but it was a hollow promise. Weygand had scheduled a second counterattack for 26 May that was to involve British and French forces, but it never took place.

Gort, not Churchill, was the one who knew what the British troops were capable of at that point in the battle. The Germans were slowly

> "THE DUNKIRK EVACUATION, WHICH HAD BEEN CODE-NAMED OPERATION DYNAMO, HAD ALREADY BEGUN WHEN THE TEMPEST THAT WAS BOCK'S ARMY GROUP BLEW APART THE BELGIAN ARMY LIKE A SEASIDE SHANTY IN A HURRICANE"

BRITISH ARMOURED THRUST AT ARRAS

The British launched a determined counterattack, but were unable to dent the Panzer Corridor to the sea

The most significant counterattack by Allied forces against the Germans during the Battle of France occurred on 21 May 1940 at Arras. Originally envisioned as a coordinated attack against Germany's Army Group A by British forces attacking southwards from Arras and French V Corps striking northwards from Compiègne, it unfolded on a much smaller scale than initially planned.

Instead of two British infantry divisions and the 1st Army Tank Brigade, the British strike force consisted of only two infantry battalions and two under-strength tank regiments. Moreover, the French strike northwards never materialised.

British Expeditionary Force commander, Lord Gort, assigned the planning of the counterattack to Major General Harold Franklyn of the British 5th Infantry Division. British Lieutenant General Giffard Le Quesne Martel was tapped to lead the battle group known as 'Frankforce'.

Martel's right column was led by the 7th Royal Tank Regiment, and his left column by the 4th Royal Tank Regiment. The two tank regiments had a total of 58 Mk I tanks and 16 Mk II tanks. Each column also had a battalion of the Durham Light Infantry, an artillery battery and an anti-tank battery. Frankforce engaged forward elements of major general Erwin Rommel's 7th Panzer Division beginning at 2pm that day. The right-hand column cleared two villages of enemy soldiers, but the column stalled in the face of a powerful Luftwaffe counterattack.

The left-hand column had much greater success, both in terms of damage inflicted on the Germans and ground captured. The 4th RTR's tanks shot up the vehicles of a motorised infantry unit and overran an anti-tank battery. A fierce clash ensued with the 4th RTR and the 6th Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry grappling with Rommel's 6th Rifle Brigade backed by 88mm flak guns serving as tank killers.

The day ended with the British having captured 400 prisoners and destroying a substantial number of German tanks. The attack cost Frankforce 32 Mk I tanks and 14 Mk II tanks, amounting to 60 per cent of its tank strength. Believing his troops were vulnerable to counterattack, Martel withdrew at nightfall, surrendering the ground his men had fought so hard to capture.

Erwin Rommel deployed German 88mm flak guns to repulse enemy armour during the British counterattack at Arras

A working party of the 1st Battalion Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders at Aix in France during November 1939

squeezing the BEF in a vice between their two powerful army groups. Guderian's panzers captured Boulogne on 23 May and Calais on 26 May. At that point, Rundstedt's panzer divisions were only 16 kilometres from Dunkirk, and Bock's infantry divisions were only 80 kilometres from Dunkirk. All hope of breaking out to the south was gone.

On 26 May 1940, Gort received a telegram from war secretary Anthony Eden, granting him permission to take up a position to defend the beaches and ports east of Gravelines and await eventual evacuation. The Dunkirk evacuation, which had been code-named Operation Dynamo, had already begun when the tempest that was Bock's army group blew apart the Belgian army like a seaside shanty in a hurricane.

Bock had ten infantry divisions to draw on as he wore down the Belgians. His assault troops pierced the right flank of the Belgian line at Courtrai in heavy fighting on 26 May. Leopold informed Gort that unless the French and British reinforced his position or counterattacked the Germans assailing his line, his army would not be able to continue fighting. The Allied forces in Belgium, which were hard pressed, made no attempt to assist the Belgians. Churchill begged Leopold to hold on for a short time longer, but the Belgians had reached the limit of their endurance. On 28 May, the Belgian army surrendered. Both the British and French would unfairly blame Leopold for what they deemed was a premature surrender, but he had given them ample warning of his army's imminent collapse.

General Heinz Guderian, leaning out of his command vehicle, led the first troops to reach the English Channel

This portrait of Lord Gort in uniform, without many of the general's decorations, is by Reginald Grenville Eves

KEY PLAYER

JOHN VEREKER (LORD GORT)

THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE COMMANDER FACED A HIDEOUS DILEMMA: DEFY ORDERS AND LET DOWN ALLIES OR RISK HIS ARMY'S DESTRUCTION

On 3 September 1939, at 11am, after Chancellor Hitler had ignored an ultimatum to withdraw invading forces from Poland, the British government declared war on Germany. Later the same day, another important government decision was made: General Viscount Lord Gort was appointed commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force, destined for northern France. Nine months later, an eyewitness described Gort gripping the guardrail aboard HMS Hebe, a minesweeper, beginning his evacuation from Dunkirk back to Britain, his head sunk to his chest in dejection and defeat.

Born John Standish Surtees Prendergast Vereker in Ireland in 1886, succeeding his father to become 6th Viscount Gort of Limerick in 1902, he joined the Grenadier Guards in 1905 as Lord Gort. Shortly after the outbreak of World War I, he was promoted to captain. Continuing to rise through the ranks, Gort served as both a staff officer and on the front line. Going on to command the 4th and then the 1st Battalions of the Grenadiers, he experienced an eventful campaign.

Wounded in battle on four occasions, he was mentioned in dispatches no less than eight times, and was awarded the Military Cross, the Distinguished Service Order with 2 Bars, and Britain's highest medal for gallantry in battle, the Victoria Cross. With a growing reputation for being virtually indestructible, this large and burly man bore an inspiring visage, earning him the nickname 'Tiger'.

Lord Gort continued to build his army career after World War I. He became an instructor at the Staff College at Camberley, later returning as its commandant in 1936. Prior to that appointment, he had been director of military training in India for four years.

In 1937, Gort experienced a rapid and unexpected series of promotions. Leslie Hore-Belisha, the secretary of state for war, was looking to revitalise the army's high command with younger officers. He first appointed Gort as his military secretary, then promoted him again to the most important post in the army, chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS). The position also brought Gort to the rank of full general, but in accepting it, he superseded many other more experienced careerists, a number of whom were not best pleased about it.

However, despite the promotions, and despite both men sharing a belief that war with Germany was all but inevitable, Gort was far from being 'Hore-Belisha's man'. In fact the pair did not get on at all. Gort was selected for the role of CIGS because of his vitality and drive – and that mightily impressive war record – but certainly not for any political abilities. When put in charge of the BEF in 1939, Gort was pleased with the prospect of returning to action, but was equally as pleased to be distancing himself from the war secretary.

Once in France, however, Lord Gort's position as BEF commander was far from straightforward. Gort was to liaise closely with General Gamelin, the French commander-in-chief, though he took his orders directly from General Georges, who commanded the armies in north-eastern France, while the BEF was attached to General Billotte's First Army group, even though Billotte had no authority over it. Further, while Gort could appeal to the British government if he believed his orders would unduly endanger his troops, this was of little practical use if events moved rapidly and the fighting proved unlike the slow-moving battles of World War I.

Compounding the situation was the fact that Gamelin and Georges had a strained relationship, every bit as bad as that between Gort and Hore-Belisha. Both were unsuited to high command in the French Army, not just because they were aging veterans of the first global conflict. The 67-year-old Gamelin was small, quiet, had little charisma and lacked vigour. He was incontrovertibly not a leader of men. At three years his junior, Georges had survived a bomb attack in 1934 that had killed King Alexander of Yugoslavia, but

Lord Gort accompanies French officer General Georges on inspection of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers at Bethune, France, April 1940

10 MAY 1940

On the day Germany attacked Belgium and Holland, Churchill replaced Chamberlain. Had there been more time, the PM might have sought options to counter such an invasion threat. Instead, the plan agreed by Chamberlain in 1939, of sending the BEF into Belgium to engage the enemy, went ahead.

Lord Gort and his staff at the Staff College in Camberley, prior to their departure to France in November 1939

the Frenchman had not escaped permanent injury, and had been, as events transpired, psychologically scarred by the event too.

The Phoney War of late-1939 and the early part of the new year erupted into full-on armed combat when German forces instigated Fall Gelb, an attack west into Holland, Belgium and France on 10 May 1940. The agreed allied response to such an attack, formulated in 1939, was Plan D, which involved the French First Army, including the BEF, advancing east to confront the invaders in Belgium. Acting in character to be nearer the action, Gort left his headquarters to set up a new field HQ close to Lille. This was an error on his part, however, as it made communications between key elements of the Allies continually difficult. Subsequently, Gort was heavily criticised for being more like a battlefront leader rather than a high-command general, and this mistake is evidence of that.

Moreover, stealthily slicing through the forests of the Ardennes, which the French believed virtually impenetrable and therefore left weakly guarded, were three German panzer corps spearheaded by General Heinz Guderian. They emerged at Sedan before blasting an 80-kilometre-wide gap in the French defensive line. As French forces recoiled, the tank units wheeled to charge to the coast.

Word of the breach reached General Georges in the early hours of 14 May. On hearing the news, he was reduced to tears – a clear indication that his past traumas had truncated his effectiveness to lead.

Without a strategic reserve force – French commanders had made no provision for any – the Sedan incursion forced the Allied armies in Belgium to pull back again to stop the panzers from turning in behind their opened right flank to attack. Gort was only fully informed of the extent of the panzer breakthrough around midnight on 18 and 19 May. He contacted the War Cabinet, outlining three possible options.

19 MAY 1940

In his dispatch to the War Cabinet, Gort suggested holding the BEF's position, relocating west to join up with new French armies, or withdrawing towards the Channel ports. Option three was a precursor to evacuation, and it was the first time Gort expressed the notion to his British superiors.

Later on 19 May, the advancing Germans severed the main communication lines between the BEF and French headquarters, while Gamelan was replaced by a 73 year old who had never commanded troops in battle, General Weygand. Gamelin's last order was for a joint counter-attack from north and south on both sides of the German breakthrough. It was two days later before Weygand adopted virtually the same plan, all of which left Gort without specific orders at a critical time.

Nevertheless, aware that his government favoured attacking to the south, he instigated a counter-push at Arras on 21 May. This was supposed to be supported by a French surge from below, but this never materialised in sufficient numbers. Had it done so, the tactic might have been more successful, as the Arras action actually spooked the Germans. They feared, for a short time at least, that their armoured divisions at the head of the thrust to the coast could be cut off from infantry divisions behind.

"GORT REACHED THE MOMENTOUS DECISION TO DEFY HIS GOVERNMENT AND MILITARY SUPERIORS, WITHDRAWING FORCES FROM ARRAS TO PLUG THE GAP ON THE LEFT FLANK"

With Weygand's plan endorsed by Churchill, Gort was under orders to attack south. Yet the BEF's left flank in Belgium came under severe pressure, and was eventually breached on 25 May. Around the same time, Gort learned that planned French attacks from the north and south had either been greatly reduced or cancelled. On the right flank, panzer forces were besieging the Channel ports of Boulogne and Calais. At this time, Gort reached the momentous decision to defy his government and military superiors, withdrawing forces from Arras to plug the gap on the left flank, and so protect the BEF's retreat for evacuation from the only port left open to it: Dunkirk.

Operation Dynamo began. Churchill could not risk his BEF commander-in-chief falling into enemy hands, and despite Gort's wish to remain with his army, he was ordered back to Britain on 31 May.

Eventually, more than 300,000 men were evacuated, preserving the British Army at a vital time. Lord Gort went on to key war-time positions as governor of Gibraltar, then Malta, while his final posting was as high commissioner of Palestine. However, by then he was terminally ill, and he died in 1946 without a chance to write his memoirs. This was unfortunate, as many of his contemporaries did, including some with long memories who had not forgiven how Gort had superseded them with those pre-war promotions. Consequently, his reputation suffered post-war, with many criticisms of his leadership of the BEF. However, Gort's reading of the force's parlous position and his decision to evacuate were crucial to Britain's ability to stay in the war and eventually win it. Others may have played the cards he was dealt differently at times, but ultimately it was never a winning hand – something Gort foresaw, and acted upon, to limit the damage.

25 MAY 1940

Opting to run wouldn't have come easily to a VC holder. Did leaving Arras scupper a potential counter-attack? Given the absence of French support, almost certainly not. Should Gort have decided sooner? When raising the prospect, he'd been ordered to attack in the opposite direction! On balance, Gort got it right.

Crisis of command – BEF commander Lord Gort with overall Allied commander General Gamelin, who was replaced just days after Germany attacked

ICONIC MOMENT

Commander-in-chief of the BEF General Lord Gort with General Alphonse Joseph Georges at Arras, France. A few months after this was taken, Georges was sacked from his role as commander-in-chief of the North-East Front.

THE EVACUATION

48 Desperation at Dunkirk
British commanders approve an epic sealift evacuation to save Allied soldiers

56 Key player: Bertram Ramsay
Being coaxed from retirement for a role at Dunkirk proved to be worthwhile

62 All haste to Dunkirk
Fraught with peril, Operation Dynamo continued despite German resistance

72 Escaping Dunkirk
In an exclusive interview, veteran Garth Wright shares his Dunkirk experience

78 The curtain falls at Dunkirk
The final days of the greatest sealift evacuation in military history

88 Key player: Gerd von Rundstedt
The man who initiated the halt order, inadvertently giving Allies time to escape

92 The role of the Royal Navy
The Royal Navy proved its resilience when bringing the troops home from Dunkirk

98 The role of the RAF
Embarking on a learning curve, the RAF struggled against the Luftwaffe's numbers

104 The weapons of Dunkirk
From Hurricane versus Messerschmitt to 25-pounder versus Panzer III

110 The shadow fleet
The hundreds of commercial ships and small vessels that contributed

78

56

104

48

DESPERATION AT DUNKIRK

BRITISH COMMANDERS APPROVE AN EPIC SEALIFT EVACUATION TO SAVE THOUSANDS OF ALLIED SOLDIERS FROM CAPTURE OR ANNIHILATION BY GERMAN FORCES

Within days of Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939, and the British declaration of war two days later, the vanguard of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) arrived on the continent of Europe. These divisions grew to 150,000 men and more than 20,000 vehicles before reaching a peak strength of 400,000 by the fateful following spring.

The marauding Nazis vanquished Poland within weeks, but World War II in the west was strangely static. The lengthy period of inactivity as German and Allied forces sat idle along the frontier of France – known as the 'Phoney War', as we've already learnt – was not to last. On 10 May 1940, the Germans launched Fall Gelb, or Case Yellow, shattering the uneasy peace with an invasion of France and the Low Countries that swept to the coast of the English Channel and threatened to cut off and surround surviving French Army and BEF units.

The British commander, Field Marshall John Vereker, 6th Viscount Gort, consulted with French General Maxime Weygand, who replaced the ineffective General Maurice Gamelin, and as the French Ninth Army collapsed, exposing the British rear, divided the BEF into two commands of roughly brigade size and established a defensive perimeter called the Canal Line from the port of Dunkirk to the town of Arras, some 86 kilometres south. Gort realised that Dunkirk, located in a marshy area that might aid in its defence and near the longest uninterrupted beach on the Channel coast, was the closest port of consequential size with possibly intact harbour facilities, offering the best hope for any withdrawal of the remnants of the BEF or French armies from the continent.

The original outlook for Operation Dynamo counted on only 48 hours of time before the Dunkirk beachhead collapsed

An Allied counterattack at Arras from 21-23 May brought initial success against the Germans; however, early gains could not be sustained, and reinforcements were scarce. The advance ultimately ground to a halt. Nevertheless, the Germans were stunned by its ferocity, and suspended offensive operations for an entire day.

Hitler later consulted with his lieutenants, and Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, commander of the Luftwaffe, convinced the Führer that air attacks alone could finish off the Allied troops being squeezed into an ever-tightening perimeter around Dunkirk. Hitler's decision to halt ground attacks and allow the

KING GEORGE VI OFFERS SOLACE

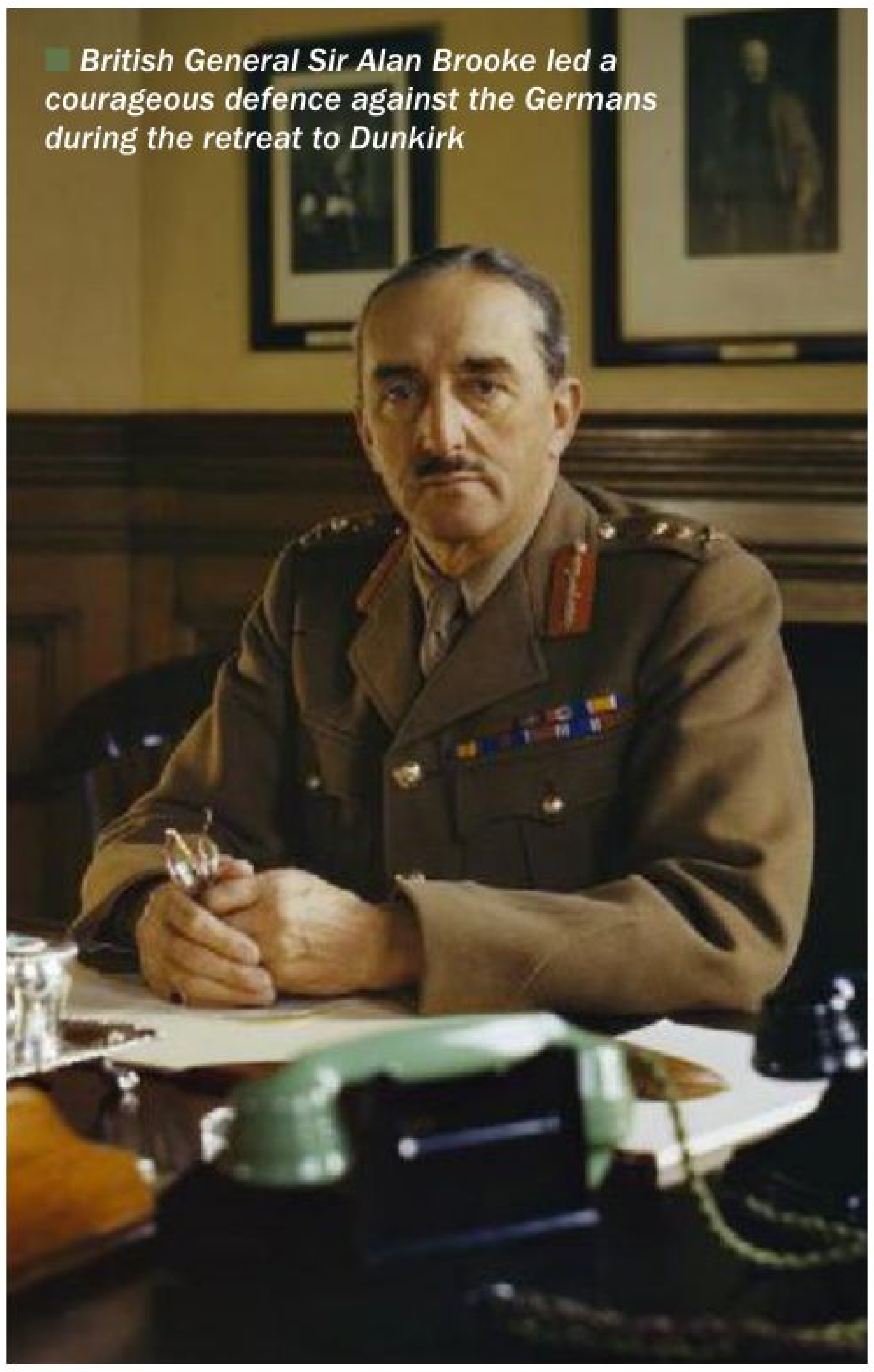
As the anxious British people read reports of the deteriorating situation in France, the king attended services at Westminster Abbey

On Sunday 26 May 1940, as news of the growing disaster during the Battle of France spread, King George VI declared a national day of prayer, and attended worship services at Westminster Abbey. Across the nation, Britons flocked to churches following the example of their monarch. Thousands queued up in lines hoping for admission to Westminster Abbey for the principal service in London.

Observers have since concluded that three extraordinary events followed. The first was Hitler's halting of his panzers that threatened to wipe out the Dunkirk beachhead. The second was a violent storm that swept across Flanders on 28 May, grounding the Luftwaffe and providing a respite from the incessant bombing and strafing that enabled a large number of British troops to move closer to evacuation points. The third was a remarkable calm that settled over the often-turbulent waters of the English Channel, allowing vessels both large and small to manoeuvre more easily for a while as they laboured to rescue the men of the BEF.

While the great success of Operation Dynamo has been referred to as the 'Miracle of Dunkirk', it may also be said that this series of other 'miracles' became a key factor in the outcome.

Lord Gort, commander of the British Expeditionary Force, gestures following a meeting with Army and Royal Air Force officers


British General Sir Alan Brooke led a courageous defence against the Germans during the retreat to Dunkirk

Luftwaffe to a deliver the coup de grâce against the enemy hemmed in at the port ranks as one of his greatest blunders of World War II. By the time Hitler reversed course and resumed ground operations, the evacuation of Allied forces from Dunkirk was well underway.

While the bulk of the BEF, the remnants of three French armies, and a contingent of Belgian forces converged on the defensive perimeter at Dunkirk, heroic stands at the coastal cities of Boulogne (60 kilometres south west) and Calais (roughly half that distance from Dunkirk) bought the troops precious time as a complex plan for evacuation came together. The 2nd Battalion Irish Guards and a single battalion of the Welsh Guards fought bravely at Boulogne, while the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment, three battalions of the Rifle Brigade, and approximately 800 French troops stood their ground at Calais.

The defenders of Boulogne lost 400 killed in action but delayed the Germans for two days. At Calais, the soldiers of the 1st Searchlight Regiment, a non-combat unit, joined the fight as Allied troops rushed into the city just moments before the Germans arrived. Sacrificing themselves willingly, these Allied troops held on for three days. Calais fell to the Germans on 26 May.

Meanwhile, the planning and execution of an epic seaborne rescue operation had begun.

> **"SOLDIERS OF THE 1ST SEARCHLIGHT REGIMENT, A NON-COMBAT UNIT, JOINED THE FIGHT AS ALLIED TROOPS RUSHED INTO THE CITY MOMENTS BEFORE THE GERMANS ARRIVED. SACRIFICING THEMSELVES, THESE ALLIED TROOPS HELD ON FOR THREE DAYS"**

FROM DOVER TO DUNKIRK

As early as mid-May, 57-year-old Vice-Admiral Bertram Ramsay had been aware of the predicament of the BEF and other Allied forces in France. As commander of the Royal Navy at Dover, Ramsay – who had joined the Royal Navy in 1898, served in World War I, retired in 1938, and been coaxed by prime minister Winston Churchill to return to service – was somewhat destined to command any evacuation effort undertaken on the continent. On 20 May, from his command bunker deep beneath Dover Castle, and chiselled into the famous white cliffs, Ramsay held his very first planning meeting for the effort that came to be known as Operation Dynamo. Ramsay's rescue plan took its name from the adjacent dynamo room, which supplied electric power to his command bunker in addition to the surrounding headquarters facilities.

As Ramsay formulated Operation Dynamo, war minister Anthony Eden assured Gort that arrangements would be made to attempt an evacuation. However, the temperament among the highest echelons of the British command was gloomy. General Sir Alan Brooke, commander of the BEF II Corps and future chief of the Imperial General Staff, penned an entry in his diary on 23 May that rang like an epitaph. "Nothing but a miracle can save the BEF now and the end cannot be very far off!" he wrote. "It is a fortnight since the German advance started and the success they have achieved is nothing short of phenomenal. There is no doubt that they are most wonderful soldiers." While the defenders of Boulogne and Calais fought on, Ramsay began to gather together as many Royal Navy vessels as was possible for the evacuation, and later called for every available ship that could carry at least 1,000 men. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) had already issued the following directive on 14 May: "The Admiralty have made an Order requesting all owners of self-propelled pleasure craft between 30 feet and 100 feet in length to send all particulars to the Admiralty within 14 days from today if they have not already been offered or requisitioned."

German Gerd von Rundstedt bears some responsibility for halting ground operations, fearing tanks would mire in marshy terrain

Although the order may have been intended to appropriate such privately owned craft for harbour or shore-patrol duties, it proved to be fortuitous. Such a practice was generally expected during wartime, and when the Dunkirk crisis arose, at least some civilians were already poised to render cross-Channel assistance.

By 25 May, Boulogne had fallen to German hands, and the tanks of the 10th Panzer Division were blasting their way into Calais. The neighbouring 1st Panzer Division was only 10 miles from Dunkirk.

Late on the afternoon of 26 May, Brigadier Claude Nicholson surrendered the citadel of Calais to the Germans, and the British War Cabinet formally authorised Gort to concentrate his forces around Dunkirk. Air Vice Marshall

Soldiers wait to be evacuated on an improvised pier of lorries during low tide

"SUBJECTED TO SEVERE LUFTWAFFE BOMBING AND EVEN ARTILLERY ROUNDS FROM THE GERMAN FORCES TIGHTENING THE LANDWARD NOOSE AROUND THE NECK OF THE BEF, THE DUNKIRK PORT FACILITIES WERE A SHAMBLES"

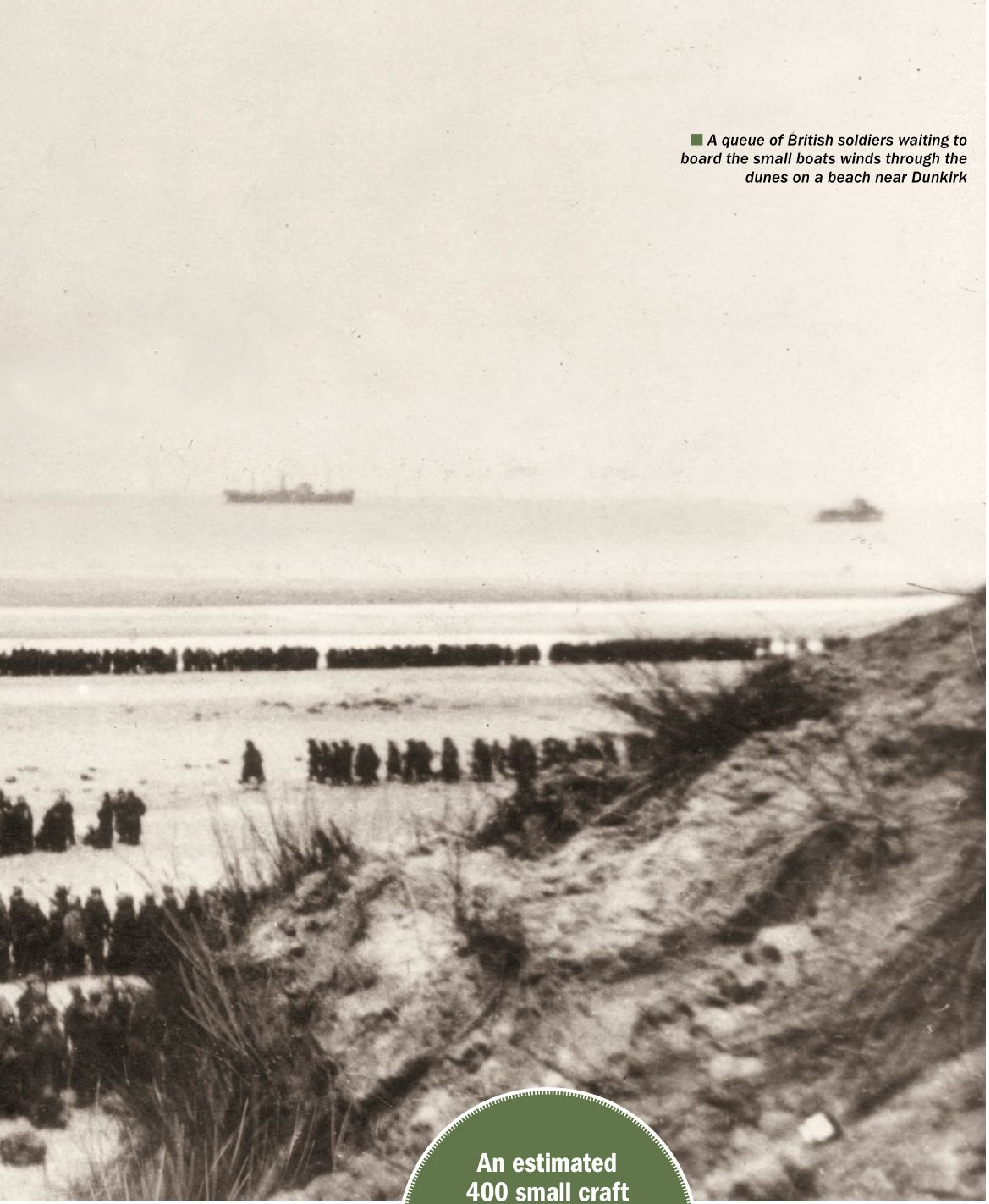
Caught in the open on a Dunkirk beach, a British soldier raises his rifle to fire at a low-flying German aircraft

Keith Park, commander of Royal Air Force No 11 Group, committed 16 squadrons of fighters to provide some defence against Luftwaffe bombing and strafing of the retreating BEF.

As the BEF front contracted further toward Dunkirk, evacuating the industrial city of Lille, the resulting gap exposed the flanks of French and Belgian formations in the line to the south, forcing a Belgian retirement that enabled the Germans to encircle around the French 1st Army.

On 27 May, British and French troops continued to make their withdrawal, and German panzer divisions renewed their attacks after Hitler lifted his ill-advised order to halt during such a crucial period of Allied vulnerability. Belgian formations were outflanked and forced to surrender. Within hours, King Leopold III agreed to Hitler's demand for unconditional surrender, and Belgium was out of the war.

General Brooke rushed four divisions forward to plug a 26-kilometre gap that developed with the Belgian capitulation. Desperate fighting took place in Wytschaete and Poperinge during the next 72 hours, but



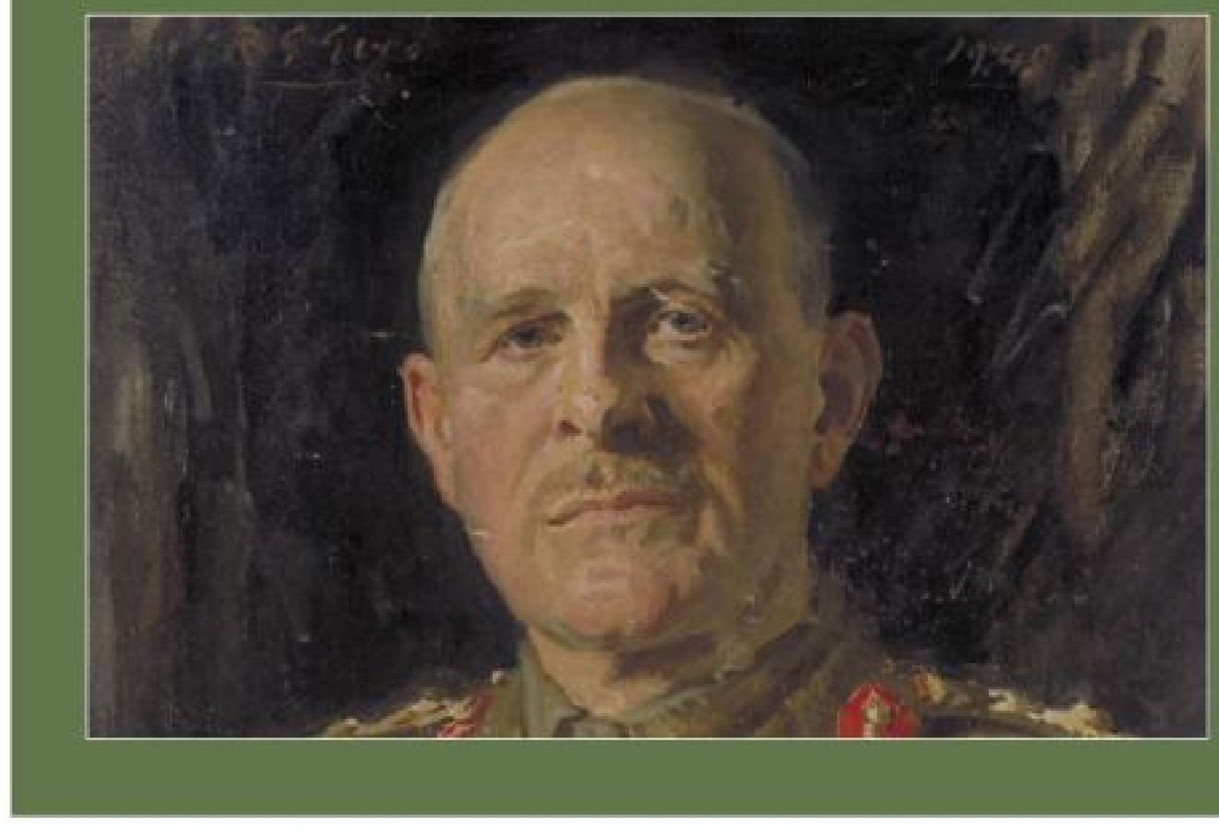
A queue of British soldiers waiting to board the small boats winds through the dunes on a beach near Dunkirk

LORD GORT OF THE BEF

The command of the British Expeditionary Force was both praised and criticised for his military conduct

John Standish Surtees Prendergast Vereker, 6th Viscount Gort, a veteran of World War I, was named commander of the British Expeditionary Force in 1939 and arrived on the European continent on 19 September. Historians have given his command of the BEF mixed reviews, affirming his decision to defend Dunkirk but criticising his reluctance to commit to cooperation with the French in a major counterattack after the German invasion of France on 10 May 1940.

A graduate of the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, Gort was appointed general aide-de-camp to King George VI on 25 June 1940, and later served as governor of Gibraltar and governor of Malta, where his leadership during the Axis siege of the Mediterranean island earned him promotion to field marshall in 1943. At the end of World War II, he was serving as high commissioner for Palestine and Transjordan. Gort died in 1946 at the age of 59.



the BEF line, continuous from the Belgian town of Ypres to the sea, managed to hold.

DYNAMO A GO

Responding to a War Department order, the Admiralty authorised the launching of Operation Dynamo at 6.57pm on 26 May. The idea had initially been to evacuate up to 40,000 BEF soldiers, however, the prospects for such a success seemed dim. Even with substantial challenges, Ramsay demonstrated coolness, command presence, and authority that turned a forlorn prospect into a resounding success. The admiral allowed subordinate officers to make crucial decisions on the spot, trusting their assessments of the situation.

Among those who played key roles in the tactical execution of Operation Dynamo was Captain William George Tennant, an Admiralty staff officer who volunteered his services to Ramsay. Appointing Tennant as senior naval officer ashore at Dunkirk, Ramsay sent the officer to the combat zone on the afternoon of 27 May. With an entourage that included a dozen officers and 160 sailors, Tennant boarded the destroyer HMS Wolfhound for the perilous passage. Harassed by German bombers for virtually the entire distance, the party arrived at 6pm that evening.

An estimated 400 small craft responded to a call for support of the evacuation effort issued on 27 May

Tennant later recalled that as he stepped ashore: "the sight of Dunkirk gave one a rather hollow feeling in the pit of the stomach. The Boche had been going for it pretty hard; there was not a pane of glass left anywhere and most of it was still unswept in the centre of the streets." He reacted swiftly to a scene of growing chaos that might otherwise have got completely out of hand. Shore police were stationed along the beaches east of the city, discouraging roving bands of undisciplined soldiers from looting or deserting altogether.

Subjected to severe Luftwaffe bombing and even artillery rounds from the German forces tightening the landward noose around the neck of the BEF, the Dunkirk port facilities were a shambles. It became clear that the best avenue of approach for the rescuing vessels would not be to sail into the harbour proper. The east beaches would have to do, Tennant thought. Two hours after his arrival, he radioed Ramsay: "Please send every available craft to beaches east of Dunkirk immediately. Evacuation tomorrow night is problematical."

Still, fighting raged around the shrinking Dunkirk perimeter, and Luftwaffe air attacks intensified. Some ships sank outright or burned fiercely after hits from German bombs. Machine-gun bullets splashed trails in the sand and plumes in the water. Infantrymen swung their Enfield rifles skyward to take vengeful potshots at low-flying enemy fighters.

By the night of 27 May, the first 7,669 Dunkirk soldiers had been rescued. Tennant was acutely aware, however, that the pace of the evacuation was moving far too slowly. Smaller boats had to make runs to the shore, load troops, and ferry them to the larger vessels waiting in deep water. Complicating matters was the simple fact that despite the best efforts of RAF fighters, soldiers waiting on the open beaches were subjected to devastating Luftwaffe bombing and strafing, and the rescue vessels were also in great peril for prolonged periods.

In quiet desperation, Tennant scanned the wrecked harbour, shrouded in smoke, its buildings and facilities blazing. German aircraft had wreaked havoc surely, but they had failed to destroy the two long breakwaters, or moles, constructed of concrete pillars driven into the seabed and wooden boardwalks that were 2.4 metres wide, that actually formed a man-made entrance to the harbour. At their originating points, the two moles were a mile apart. They converged towards one another as they jutted into the open sea.

NECESSITY FOSTERS INVENTION

Taking a closer look, Tennant believed that the moles might be used to embark groups of soldiers in an orderly fashion directly onto the larger rescue ships, rather than solely relying on the time-consuming ferry process along the beach. He was disappointed to learn, however, that the West Mole, which extended only 152 metres, was surrounded mostly by shallow water – unsuitable for the deep draft of most larger ships. Therefore, he decided against the risk of using it.

The East Mole, though, showed some promise. Extending an impressive 1.2 kilometres towards the Channel, it was anchored to the beach right at the edge of Dunkirk proper, near an area called Malo-les-Bains, a seaside resort in happier times. There were tall dunes nearby that might provide some cover for soldiers as they were grouped for their march down the East Mole and then, hopefully, directly aboard large ships that would carry them to Dover and safety.

To test his theory, Tennant ordered the sleek, modern steamship, Queen of the Channel, built in 1936, to ply the waters of the English Channel for the General Steam Navigation Company, to ease into the harbour and come alongside the East Mole. When the movement was completed, the inventive officer knew that he had a workable alternative to the beach evacuation. Unfortunately, Queen of the Channel was later sunk by Luftwaffe bombers during Operation Dynamo, but it had rendered a valuable service that ultimately saved thousands of Allied lives.

Just after 4.30am on 28 May, Tennant informed Ramsay that a change in procedure would reap great benefits. He asked those large rescue ships that were standing offshore waiting for loads of evacuees, particularly the fast Royal Navy destroyers that were available, to be redirected to tie up at the East Mole.

Throughout the day, the rescue effort continued unabated. As Operation Dynamo developed, prime minister Churchill was briefed regularly on its progress. As the day wore on, 11,874 soldiers had been evacuated from the harbour, most of them from the East Mole. Another 5,930 had been plucked from the east beaches, which were still in use. At Lille, 40,000 soldiers of the trapped French First Army held on against the might of seven

German infantry and panzer divisions. Their grim determination, which lasted until the end of May, occupied substantial German forces that might have otherwise smashed the Dunkirk beachhead had they been released.

PRECARIOUS BUT PROMISING

Perhaps by this time, Hitler had realised his error in halting the ground assault and providing a window of opportunity for the British to further organise Operation Dynamo. While German Intelligence confirmed on 27 May that the evacuation effort had begun, Admiral Otto Schniewind, a high-ranking Kriegsmarine staff officer, noted in a conversation with Göring on 27 May that the opportunity to annihilate the BEF was slipping away.

"A regular and orderly transport of large numbers of troops with equipment cannot take place in the hurried and difficult conditions prevailing," Schniewind told the pompous, arrogant Reichsmarshal. "Evacuation of troops without equipment, however, is conceivable by means of large numbers of smaller vessels, coastal and ferry steamers, fishing trawlers, drifters, and other small craft, in good weather, even from the open coast."

Indeed, the Allied troops that evacuated from Dunkirk had lost nearly all of their personal kit, and heavy equipment lay in abandoned clusters along the beaches and in the town itself. Still, saving the soldiers was the primary objective. Time was very much of the essence. There was absolutely no guarantee that those stout soldiers manning the Dunkirk perimeter could hold out much longer.

But the boats were surely coming – not just the Royal Navy, but watercraft of every description, even sailing ships and dinghies. Many of these were manned by civilians, who left the safety of England to run the gauntlet to Dunkirk. Arthur D Divine was among them, and he later remembered: "It was the queerest, most nondescript flotilla that ever was, and it was manned by every kind of Englishman, never more than two men, often only one, to each small boat."

He continued: "It was dark before we were well clear of the English coast. It wasn't rough, but there was a little chop on, sufficient to make it very wet… When destroyers went by, full tilt, the wash was a serious matter to us little fellows. We could only spin the wheel to try to head into waves, hang on, and hope for the best."

Thanks to the command and organisational skills of Admiral Bertram Ramsay, the quick thinking of Captain Tennant, and the incredible bravery of many soldiers who gave their lives so that others might survive the debacle of defeat, Operation Dynamo was well and truly underway.

As daylight ebbed on 28 May 1940, there was a glimmer of hope that the results of the rescue effort would exceed even the most optimistic expectations. However, in the face of a mighty enemy, the issue remained very much in doubt.

Soldiers from the British Royal Ulster Rifles attempt to launch boats to reach the destroyers waiting to take them to Dover

Ramsay in 1944, the same year he stopped a dispute between Churchill and King George over who would watch the D-Day landings from HMS Belfast. Ramsay pointed out it was too dangerous for either to attend, so they didn't

KEY PLAYER

BERTRAM RAMSAY

COAXED FROM RETIREMENT BY CHURCHILL FOR A PIVOTAL ROLE AT DUNKIRK, HE WOULD BECOME ONE OF BRITAIN'S MOST SUCCESSFUL MILITARY LEADERS

Dover Castle has stood guard over the English Channel for more than 800 years. As war with Germany loomed large on the horizon in the late 1930s, the Royal Navy once again considered Dover Command, located at the site of the medieval castle, to be of crucial strategic importance. So on 24 August 1939, the flag of Vice-Admiral Bertram Home Ramsay, the new officer-in-charge, was run up the flagpole. He was tasked primarily with protecting the Straits of Dover for British shipping. He was to do a lot more than that.

Born in London on 20 January 1883 into a family with a long Scottish history, Ramsay showed an early example of independent thinking when, instead of following his father and brothers into the army, he chose to join the navy. He became a midshipman in 1899, subsequently receiving a posting on board HMS Crescent, before eventually serving aboard the revolutionary new battleship HMS Dreadnaught.

Of slight build in stature, Ramsay nevertheless impressed with his intelligence, self-confidence and vigour. He thrived in a Royal Navy that was modernising and becoming increasingly technical. Ramsay broadened his experience at the Navy Signal School, then attended the Royal Naval War College at Portsmouth in 1913, graduating a year later as a lieutenant commander. He was back aboard Dreadnaught when World War I began.

Opting to stay put in the hope of receiving his own command, Ramsay was offered, but declined, the post of flag lieutenant for the Grand Fleet's cruiser commander. History turns on such calls. Had he taken the post, Ramsay would have been aboard HMS Defence, which exploded at the battle of Jutland with the loss of nearly 900 men. Instead, his command came with the monitor M25 in the Dover Patrol, then the destroyer HMS Broke. The ship participated in the Second Ostend Raid in which Ramsay was mentioned in dispatches.

After World War I, Ramsay alternated between shore postings and active duty ship commands, earning a number of promotions. By 1935, it was Rear Admiral Ramsay who was appointed chief of staff to the commander of the Home Fleet, Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse. The two men were old friends but they actually clashed over how the fleet should be administered. While his boss firmly wanted to maintain centralised control, Ramsay instead believed in delegation to better allow commanders to act at sea. He stood by this belief to the extent that he asked to be relieved of his duties. Inactive and on half-pay for several years, he was placed on the retired list while the Royal Navy reached a decision on his future.

It was Winston Churchill who lobbied successfully for the retired rear admiral's extensive knowledge of Channel operations to be put to good use. By the time Churchill had returned to office as first lord of the admiralty in September 1939, Ramsay was in situ at Dover Command, with a promotion to vice admiral waiting in the pipeline.

A labyrinth of tunnels had been cut into the chalk beneath the castle at Dover in 1803 in expectation of a Napoleonic invasion. Little used since, the new commander swiftly set about utilising them to establish a modern, fit-for-purpose naval base. The main operations room featured a huge table-mounted, three-dimensional map on which ship movements could be tracked and traced. Other subsidiary operations and radio rooms were located in further corridor-connected tunnels, which – previously dormant for so long – were soon buzzing with activity around the clock. The rapidity with which Ramsay brought the base up to speed for what lay ahead showed that the 57 year old still possessed boundless energy and innovative leadership.

Ramsay's own subterranean office, with its chalk-white walls, was referred to by the man himself as his "igloo." He was summoned from there to London on 19 May 1940 to attend an urgent meeting at the War Office. The increasingly precarious position of the British Expeditionary Force in France was fully explained, with the possibility of the need for evacuation seriously discussed for the first time. The vice admiral learned that all available shipping – naval or otherwise – would be placed at his disposal, for if such an operation was to take place, he would be masterminding it.

The day after the War Office meeting, Ramsay set about the task in the room providing the power to Dover Castle, the Dynamo room, hence the operational name for the evacuation. Initially, it was hoped that embarkation could take place from the ports of Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk. Yet by 23 May, the first two of those ports were both under heavy attack. Some units were able to be evacuated by sea via Boulogne, but despite some heroic resistance from the French and

27 MAY 1940
"Operation Dynamo is to commence" was the Admiralty signal wording instigating the evacuation. Ramsay had a large number of merchant vessels pressed into service for the mission. These were mainly cross-Channel ferries and railway packet steamers.

Ramsay (top row, second left) at a meeting of the Allied Expeditionary Air Forces in London, 1944

Churchill called for Ramsay's appointment to Dover Command. Both understood the location's strategic importance in guarding the English Channel

"NO MATTER WHICH ROUTE, ALL SHIPPING WAS VULNERABLE TO AIR ATTACK IF THE RAF COULD NOT KEEP THE LUFTWAFFE AT BAY. LITTLE WONDER THAT AS OPERATION DYNAMO BEGAN… THE HOPE WAS FOR NO MORE THAN 45,000 TROOPS TO BE EVACUATED"

British garrisons, both ports were in German control by 26 May. Ramsay re-focused his plans upon Dunkirk only.

The problems were immense. The inner harbour was out of use following heavy bombardment, leaving the outer harbour concrete breakwaters, known as moles, or the beaches as the only embarkation points. Yet shallow water around Dunkirk prevented Ramsay's largest troop carriers from getting close enough to either of these points. He had destroyers, passenger ferries and some Dutch coasters, but what he lacked were enough small boats to carry men from the beaches to the ships that were waiting offshore.

The routes to Dunkirk posed further problems. Route Z, approaching from the west, was only 39 sea miles, but brought rescue ships close to the captured French coast, risking severe bombardment from German artillery. Route Y, an east approach, was safer but considerably longer at 87 sea miles, and therefore much slower. The route also became vulnerable to artillery attack as the Germans pushed back the east perimeter around Dunkirk. Eventually, Ramsay created Route X, a third approach of 55 sea miles, by clearing a gap in the minefields. Yet no matter which route, all shipping was vulnerable to air attack if the RAF could not keep the Luftwaffe at bay. Little wonder, then, that as Operation Dynamo began on 27 May, the hope was for no more than 45,000 troops to be evacuated.

31 MAY 1940

Ramsay had a large number of merchant vessels pressed into service for the mission, including Mona's Isle. A converted armoured boarding vessel, it was the first ship recorded as completing a Dover-Dunkirk-Dover round trip, carrying 1,420 troops.

In a demonstration of the flexible system of local command that Ramsay had argued for in 1935, the embarkation controller at Dunkirk, Captain WG Tennant, directed a cross-Channel steamer to attempt mooring against the East Mole, as the West Mole was inaccessible due to fire. Even though the breakwater was definitely not designed for docking or loading, Tennant had hoped to increase the pace of the evacuation, and the idea certainly worked. Following that example, Tenant swiftly set up procedures for Royal Navy destroyers to repeat the process. The fast, nimble warships docked at the Mole, collected troops, then reversed out to speed back to Dover in a continuous rescue cycle.

Unfortunately, Ramsay didn't live to see the end of the war that he helped win

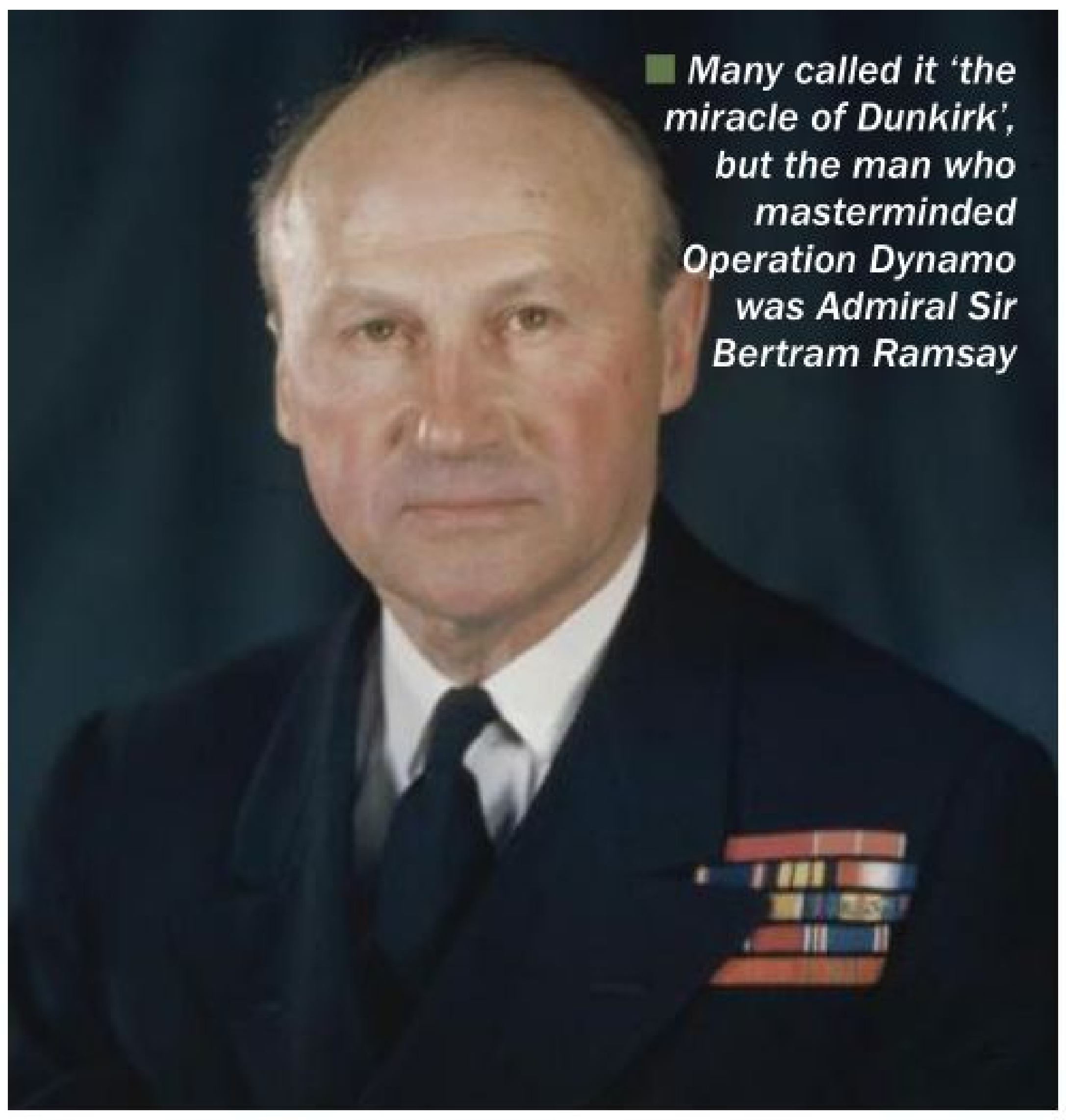
2 JUNE 1940
The message "BEF evacuated" was received just before midnight with the last British troops sailing home. But there were still many Frenchmen trapped in Dunkirk. Ramsay called for one final effort, signalling "We cannot leave our allies in the lurch..."

With the evacuation continuing, it was announced to the British public on 29 May. An appeal was made for owners of private boats to volunteer their craft to help. A staggering number did so, and an armada of small vessels, known as the 'Little Ships', departed for Dunkirk. They played a vital part in the evacuation, either ferrying troops from beaches to larger ships, or in full cross-Channel rescues.

Operation Dynamo continued until 4 June. By then, more than 338,000 allied troops had been rescued. Delegation, and backing subordinates to act – the essence of his views on how the Royal Navy should function – allowed Ramsay to keep abreast of the complex, endlessly changing situation, to harness a fleet approaching 1,000 vessels, and to not be overwhelmed by the task. He received a knighthood for his efforts.

Ramsay's war was far from over, however. He remained at Dover for a further two years, ensuring defence of the area against a potential German invasion. Ramsay became deputy Naval commander of the allied invasion of North Africa, then commanded the eastern task force during the invasion of Sicily in 1943. Later that year, Ramsay was made Naval commander-in-chief for Operation Neptune, the landings in Normandy of the allied invasion of Northern France. During this largest seaborne invasion in history, Ramsay's ships delivered 1 million allied troops to the area in a month.

With the war entering its final stages, the by-then Admiral Ramsay was due to fly to a meeting in Brussels in January 1945. He was killed when his plane crashed on takeoff, denying him the chance to see the end of a conflict to which he had contributed so much.



Many called it 'the miracle of Dunkirk', but the man who masterminded Operation Dynamo was Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay

ICONIC MOMENT

One of the 'little ships' attempts to rescue troops from the East Mole. An oil storage facility burns in the background, creating large plumes of smoke that covered the skies over Dunkirk.

ALL HASTE TO DUNKIRK

FROM THE OUTSET, OPERATION DYNAMO WAS FRAUGHT WITH PERIL, BUT THE SEABORNE EVACUATION CONTINUED DESPITE STAGGERING LOSSES AND HEAVY GERMAN RESISTANCE

Each of the three routes carefully plotted for the evacuating ships of the upcoming Dunkirk rescue operation presented its own hazards.

Designated routes X, Y and Z were each used at various times in the campaign, and required steely nerves for those who undertook the effort, sometimes using buoys and light ships as reference points. Route X opened on 29 May, ran 102 kilometres, first north and then north west from Dunkirk, before taking a sharp turn south west towards Dover. Route X was generally secure from attack by enemy ships or planes once the coastline was cleared, but minefields and shoals made it treacherous for use at night.

Route Y was by far the longest at 161 kilometres, edging north east from Dunkirk before turning sharply west and then south to Dover. Route Y crossed the paths of German U-boats and patrolling aircraft. Its travel time to Dover was four hours longer than the most direct course, 72-kilometre Route Z, which ran west from Dunkirk with a lengthy period in range of German artillery on the French coastline before a gradual turn north west to reach Dover.

The Royal Navy was taking a dreadful pounding, and on 29 May alone, the destroyers Grafton, Grenade and Wakeful were sunk, while six others were damaged, and six merchant ships involved in the operation went down in the harbour. Wakeful was hit by a pair of torpedoes from the German E-boat S-30 that morning, and only one of 640 Allied soldiers aboard survived the sinking, along with just 25 of the destroyer's complement of 110 sailors. When Grafton attempted to render assistance to Wakeful, a torpedo from the submarine U-62 ripped into its stern, killing 15 men including the captain. Grafton was wracked by a violent secondary explosion, and another destroyer, Ivanhoe, sank the hulk with gunfire.

HMS Grenade crossed the English Channel to Dunkirk during the night of 28-29 May. After daylight, the destroyer was set upon by German Junkers Ju-87 dive bombers, screaming down in near-vertical dives through a hail of antiaircraft fire. Three German bombs set the destroyer ablaze, killing 14 sailors outright and mortally wounding four more. Fears that the destroyer might sink at the East Mole, which would probably block the approaches of other ships, prompted orders to cast off.

Despite an initial projection of rescuing 45,000 troops, Operation Dynamo saved the lives of more than 330,000 men

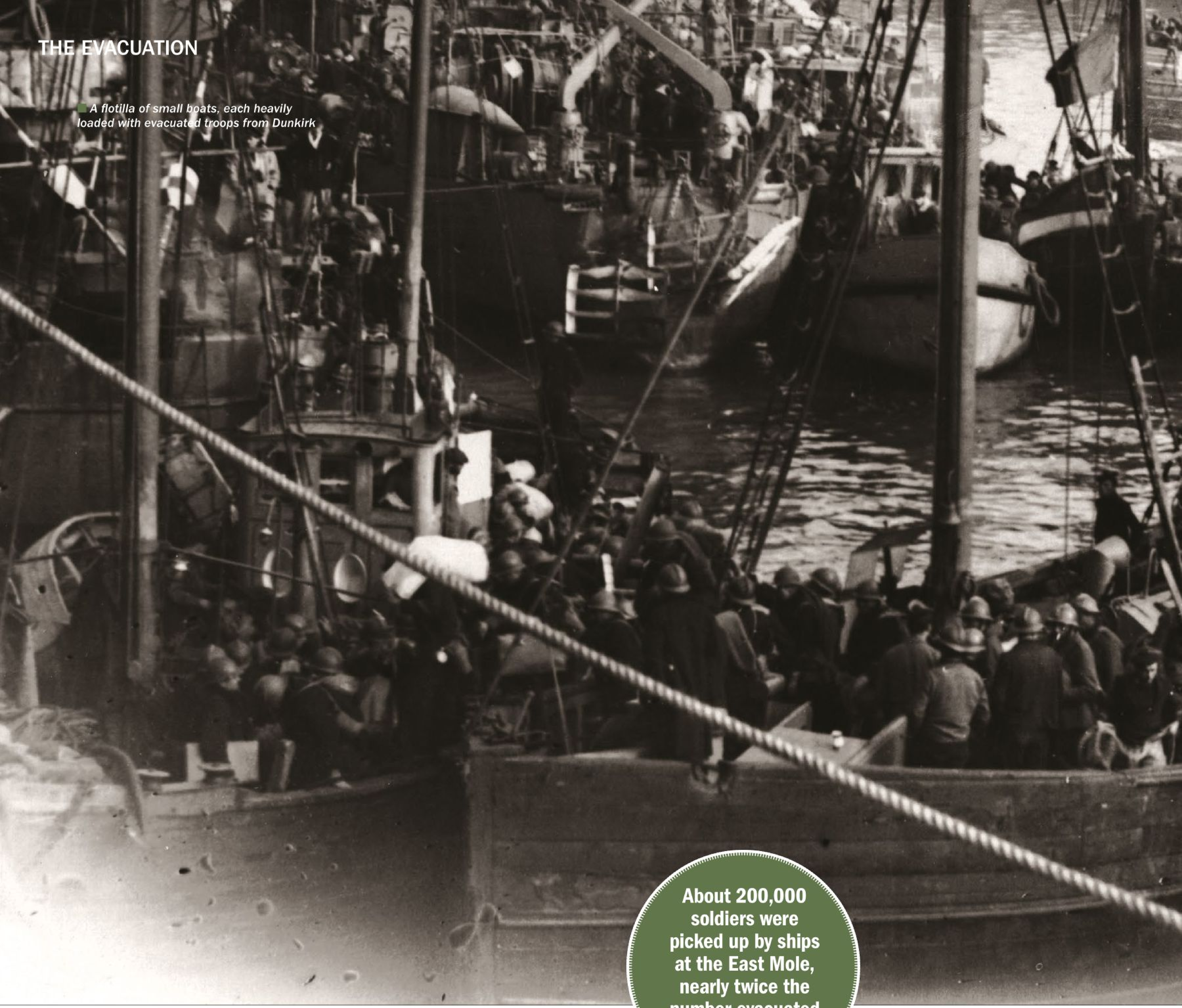
VALIANT SERVICE OF HMS GRENADE

Lost at Dunkirk, HMS Grenade is representative of the modern Royal Navy destroyers that took part

Launched on 12 November 1935, and commissioned four months later, the G-class destroyer HMS Grenade and its sister warships were sleek workhorses of the Royal Navy during World War II. Hit by German bombs and sunk off Dunkirk on 29 May 1940, Grenade and its crew are remembered as providing outstanding service during an all-too-brief career.

At Dunkirk, Grenade displayed its best attributes despite the unusual duty of ferrying rescued soldiers to safety. Destroyers were built for speed and armed to the teeth, perfectly suited for rapid operations. At sea they provided escorts for convoys and capital ships, vigilant against enemy submarines and aircraft, and adept at picking up survivors of sunken vessels, or plucking downed airmen from the sea.

Grenade displaced 1,350 tons with a draught of 3.8 metres. It was 98.5 metres long with a beam of 10.1 metres. Three Admiralty drum boilers and Parsons steam turbines produced 34,000 shaft horsepower and a top speed of 36 knots. The destroyer carried four 4.7-inch guns, eight 12.7mm machine guns, eight 533mm torpedo tubes, and an array of depth charges. The wartime complement included 146 officers and sailors. Prior to its loss at Dunkirk, Grenade served in the Mediterranean and the campaign in Norway.



A flotilla of small boats, each heavily loaded with evacuated troops from Dunkirk

About 200,000 soldiers were picked up by ships at the East Mole, nearly twice the number evacuated from the beaches

Alongside Grenade, the destroyer Jaguar was hit by a bomb that killed 13 and wounded 19. The minesweeper HMS Waverley, with 600 soldiers packed aboard, took bomb hits and sank rapidly, losing about 350 men. Amid the chaos, the dan layer HMS Comfort was fired upon by friendly ships and rammed by the minesweeper HMS Lydd, killing four men.

Grenade drifted into the harbour channel and was taken in tow by the trawler John Cattling. As the destroyer lay derelict on the edge of Dunkirk's outer harbour, its magazines exploded and the shattered warship sank during the night.

Although grievous naval losses had been expected, such a rate of attrition was both shocking and unsustainable. The following day, the Admiralty issued orders for all its newest destroyers to clear the vicinity of Dunkirk. Only 18 destroyers, most of them of World War I vintage or older, remained on station.

While the lethal air-sea duel continued on 29 May, another 47,310 Allied soldiers reached safety in England.

PRESSURE AND PERSEVERANCE

As the Dunkirk defensive perimeter continued to shrink, Lord Gort (commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF)) became worried that German artillery fire might force a suspension of the evacuation effort, but operations were to continue despite the ongoing threat and the devastating raids made by the Luftwaffe.

Before he would authorise ships to use Route X, Admiral Bertram Ramsay, overall commander of Royal Navy operations in the vicinity of Kent, ordered minesweepers into the area to clear as much of that hazard as possible, while three Royal Navy destroyers ventured within range of any German artillery that might blast away at evacuating vessels to determine the extent of that threat. Luftwaffe dive bombers attacked the destroyers but scored no hits, and there was no appreciable artillery fire. By the afternoon of 29 May, Route X was open.

French destroyers and Dutch ships joined the evacuation and helped quicken its pace, while both the East Mole and the beach were still being utilised. Across the English Channel, the port of Dover teemed with activity as 25 Royal Navy destroyers, 16 motor yachts, 12 Dutch skoots, four hospital ships, and more than 20 other vessels moved through the harbour that day with their precious cargo.

The experience of Arthur D Divine, one of many volunteer seamen who braved the gauntlet of enemy fire during Operation Dynamo, is representative of the fortitude they displayed. "Even before it was fully dark we had

picked up the glow of the Dunkirk flames," he wrote. "The aircraft started dropping parachute flares. We saw them hanging all about us in the night, like young moons. The sound of the firing and the bombing was with us always, growing steadily louder as we got nearer and nearer… The beach, black with men, illumined by the fires, seemed a perfect target, but no doubt the thick clouds of smoke were a useful screen.

"The picture will always remain sharp-etched in my memory," Divine's account continued, "the lines of men wearily and sleepily staggering across the beach from the dunes to the shallows, falling into little boats, great columns of men thrust out into the water among bomb and shell splashes… As the front ranks were dragged aboard the boats, the rear ranks moved up, from ankle deep to knee deep, from knee deep to waist deep, until they, too, came to shoulder depth and their turn… The little boats that ferried from the beach to the big ships in deep water listed drunkenly with the weight of men… And always down the dunes and across the beach came new hordes of men, new columns, new lines."

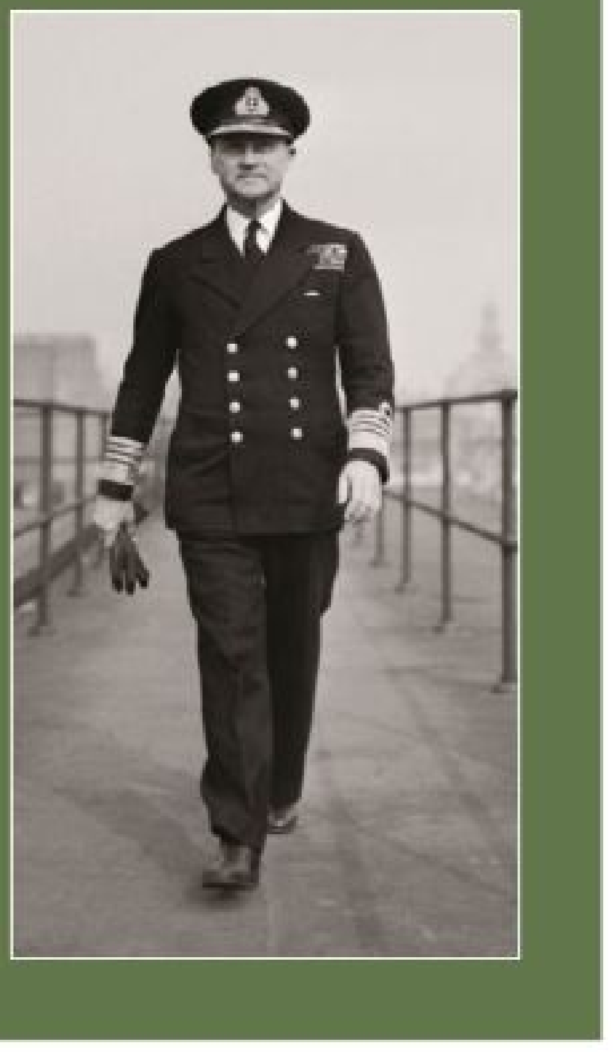
The ordeal of retreat, incessant bombardment, and finally salvation took its toll on the suffering soldiers of the BEF. Sam Kershaw, a private in the 42nd East Lancashire Division, remembered: "We were fighting in northern France when a German armoured column caught up with us and sprayed the whole unit with gunfire. We sheltered from the gunfire in a ditch and lost all our equipment. When we got away from the German column our officer said we had to make our way to Dunkirk, where we were going to be evacuated."

The trek took 48 hours, mostly on foot. "When we got there I laid down in the sand, tired and starving, and went to sleep," recalled Kershaw. "We waited in some nearby sand hills all of the next day and when night fell we were taken in a rowing boat to HMS Halcyon (a Royal Navy minesweeper). I fell asleep on deck, and when I awoke I saw the white cliffs of Dover in front of me."

"AS THE FRONT RANKS WERE DRAGGED ABOARD THE BOATS, THE REAR RANKS MOVED UP, FROM ANKLE DEEP TO KNEE DEEP, FROM KNEE DEEP TO WAIST DEEP"

ADMIRAL BERTRAM RAMSAY

Responsible for the formulation and execution of Operation Dynamo, Admiral Ramsay performed brilliantly



Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay was retired when World War II broke out in 1939; however, he returned to duty, gaining lasting fame as the naval officer in charge of Operation Dynamo, the evacuation of Allied troops at Dunkirk, and later serving as a senior commander in the Mediterranean. On 6 June 1944, he commanded Allied naval forces during Operation Overlord, the invasion of Western Europe.

Ramsay faced enormous challenges in planning Operation Dynamo. Perhaps chief among them was the short timeframe in which he and subordinate officers devised the evacuation plan. From 26 May to 4 June 1940, he demonstrated great discernment amid conflicting information from the combat area, later reporting directly on the venture to King George VI. For his service during the Dunkirk crisis, Ramsay was made a knight commander of the Order of the Bath. He was tragically killed in a plane crash in France on 2 January 1945.

DECISIONS AT SEA

As the embarkation process was repeated on the beach and at the East Mole, it achieved a measure of remarkable efficiency. Canadian-born commander James Campbell 'Jack' Clouston served as pier master at the East Mole, enforcing discipline as strictly as he saw possible, sometimes at the point of his revolver. Under Clouston's severe direction, 600 men could be loaded aboard a ship in as little as 20 minutes.

Clouston had been in command of the destroyer HMS Isis, and was temporarily assigned to Captain William Tennant's shore party headed for Dunkirk while his ship was undergoing repairs. Soon after arriving, Tennant's officers cut cards to determine their assignments during the evacuation. Clouston drew the East Mole and discharged his duties with composure for the next five days and nights, scarcely resting.

On 1 June, Clouston returned to Dover to deliver a report to Admiral Ramsay. The next day, Clouston and 30 other men boarded two RAF motor launches for the trip back to Dunkirk. As they neared the coast of France, the launches were set upon by eight Stukas. When his launch was sunk, Clouston ordered the other boat to continue on its way. Rescue never came, and the hero of the East Mole died of hypothermia. Only one survivor of his launch was pulled from the Channel.

Although there was no doubt Tennant was performing well and would retain command as senior naval officer ashore at Dunkirk, the Admiralty decided to dispatch Rear Admiral William Frederic Wake-Walker to take charge of all ships operating off the French-Belgian coastline. Wake-Walker arrived off Dunkirk on 30 May aboard the minesweeper HMS Hebe. In short order, he joined the lengthening list of Operation Dynamo's stalwarts, rendering yeoman service.

When he discovered that the modern Royal Navy destroyers had been withdrawn due to the heavy losses sustained the previous day and only 15 older destroyers remained at his disposal, Wake-Walker went directly to Admiral Ramsay with his request for the return of new destroyers to the Dunkirk area. Ramsay, in turn, went to the Admiralty and his voice held sway. Soon, seven new destroyers were back in the fight.

Despite the absence of the modern destroyers, 30 May proved to be the most productive day yet for Operation Dynamo. A total of 53,823 BEF and French soldiers were evacuated, while Allied troops continued to trickle toward the coast. Billowing clouds of smoke obscured the beaches and the East Mole from German air attack for much of the day, while seven of the older destroyers managed to board 1,000 soldiers each and sail for England unmolested. Six British vessels, including two old destroyers, were damaged by German bombs, while the French destroyer Bourrasque struck a mine and was later sunk by German artillery fire with heavy loss of life.

IN THE AIR

All the while, the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the Luftwaffe battled for control of the skies above the English Channel, and each paid a high price. Great damage was inflicted on the British relief flotilla, but the Luftwaffe lost scores of aircraft shot down during a strenuous week of combat. German losses have been estimated at 132 planes during the air battles above Dunkirk; however, many historians believe this count is significantly lower than the actual number. RAF losses during the critical period of aerial combat reached a shocking tally of 177.

Many of the British soldiers rescued at Dunkirk complained about the absence of the RAF. Believing essentially that German fighters and bombers had been allowed to bomb and

British troops marching along the pier to the rescue vessels at Dunkirk

The single paddle steamer Medway Queen made seven sorties to and from Dunkirk, rescuing 7,000 soldiers

strafe at will, they were understandably bitter. Of course, their perception of the role the RAF played in Operation Dynamo is at least somewhat misguided.

While the Royal Navy, Army and civilian participants gave full measure at Dunkirk, the mission of the RAF was no less daunting. The Battle of France had substantially depleted British fighter strength on the European continent. Actually, a French plea for more British planes was summarily rejected because RAF Fighter Command realised that the shortage of Hawker Hurricane and Supermarine Spitfire fighters was acute. It was imperative that a reasonable number of fighters, particularly the sleek, modern Spitfires, be held in reserve should the Luftwaffe launch an all-out air campaign against Britain itself – possibly even in preparation for an invasion of the British Isles.

In the event, Fighter Command did commit large numbers of aircraft to the battle above Dunkirk. They patrolled the English Channel to prevent Luftwaffe raids against troop-laden ships, and engaged in dogfights with German Messerschmitt Me-109 and Me-110 fighters that would otherwise be machine-gunning soldiers exposed on the beaches below. RAF fighters also intercepted German bombers on their way to attack Dunkirk. During these missions it was preferable to engage the enemy as far from the beaches and harbour as possible, preventing the Stukas and Heinkel He 111s from dropping their deadly cargoes at all. These engagements often took place at high altitudes, out of the sight and hearing range of the suffering soldiers of the BEF. Throughout Operation Dynamo, the RAF flew 4,822 air sorties, which can hardly be seen as an absentee performance.

Among the numerous RAF heroes of Operation Dynamo was Squadron Leader Brian 'Sandy' Lane, a daring Spitfire pilot who had joined the RAF in 1936 to escape a dead-end factory job. Lane assumed command of No. 19 Squadron after its previous commander was shot down. His leadership was exceptional, and one squadron mate recalled: "He was completely unflappable, no matter what the odds, his voice always calm and reassuring, issuing orders which always seemed to be the right decisions."

Lane received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his service during Operation Dynamo, and his superiors judged his pilot rating as "excellent." Sadly, he did not survive the war. In December 1942, during a fighter sweep over Holland, he was attacked by several Me-109s and not heard from again. The intrepid pilot was 25 years old.

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

By 31 May, the rescue operation had progressed to the extent that the number of British troops around Dunkirk had dwindled to a fraction of its peak some five days earlier. Prime Minister Winston Churchill and War Minister Eden were well aware that the capture of such a high-ranking Army officer as Lord Gort could not be permitted, but as the Dunkirk defensive pocket contracted, its ability to be able to fend off any German attacks would inevitably be compromised.

Admiral William Frederic Wake-Walker took charge of all Allied shipping off the French-Belgian coast on 30 May 1940

On 31 May, Gort, General Alan Brooke (whose brilliant leadership of British ground troops had contributed greatly to the success of Operation Dynamo) and General Oliver Leese (deputy chief of staff of the BEF) were evacuated. The remaining British soldiers in France were placed under the command of General Harold Alexander.

High winds swept smoke and haze away from the vicinity of Dunkirk, revealing fresh targets for German aircraft and artillery, and the beaches were temporarily closed to small boats. German ground forces compelled the British defenders to abandon La Panne, the furthest east of the Dunkirk beaches. The thin perimeter shrank to a depth of only five kilometres. Despite the hazards, a peak number of 68,014 men were evacuated on 31 May, with 22,942 of these taken from the beaches and 45,072 from the East Mole. In five days, 194,620 men had been safely returned to England.

In exchange, the Royal Navy destroyers Express, Icarus, Keith and Winchelsea were damaged by German bombs on 31 May, but they continued the assigned duties. Express, which was a minelaying destroyer commissioned in 1934, made runs between Dunkirk and Dover, decks packed with rescued soldiers. Along with the destroyer HMS Shikari, Express was the last Royal Navy ship to exit Dunkirk harbour at the conclusion of Operation Dynamo on 4 June. Swift, deadly German E-boats torpedoed the French destroyers Cyclone and Scirocco, later sunk by German bombers with the loss of 59 seamen in addition to 600 soldiers.

Both generals Harold Alexander and Oliver Leese played key roles in the Mediterranean Theatre and the Italian Campaign

Bernard Stums of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) watched as beleaguered ships and men of Operation Dynamo made landfall in England. "At dawn this morning, I stood on the quays of a south coast port… and I saw several ships coming in and every one of them was crammed full of tired, battle-stained and bloodstained British soldiers. Soon after dawn I watched two warships steam in, one listing heavily to port under the enormous load of men she carried on her deck.

"In a few minutes, her tired commander had her alongside, and a gangway was thrown from her decks to the quay," Stums continued. "Transport officers counted the men as they came ashore. No question of units, no question of regiments, no question even of nationality, for there were French and Belgian soldiers who had fought side by side with the British in the battle of Flanders."

Soldiers would wade out into the water, waiting for their turn to be scooped up into the vessels and taken back to Dover

ICONIC MOMENT

Wounded British soldiers make their way off a destroyer in Dover on 31 May 1940. This photo was taken two days after Britain withdrew a number of ships to defend its country after heavy losses.

ESCAPING DUNKIRK

VETERAN GARTH WRIGHT EXPLAINS WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE STUCK ON THE BEACHES AND HOW HE ESCAPED TO FIGHT ANOTHER DAY

Garth Wright joined the British army in the summer of 1939, along with four of his close friends, as part of the 153 Battery with the 51st Light Anti Aircraft Regiment Royal Artillery. The training he had was rudimentary: they would sometimes have just one gun to train with; someone would hide in the bushes, popping up sporadically holding a target, and the sergeant would give its bearings for the trainees to aim at. That was virtually all the training Garth was given before he was sent into action in 1940. He would serve from 1939 to May 1946 as a gunner and despatch rider. Today Garth lives in Plymouth. A member of the Royal British Legion, he helps to raise money for the Poppy Appeal and regularly attends Dunkirk memorial events.

GARTH WRIGHT

Born on 13 August 1919, Garth was in the British armed forces from August 1939 to May 1946. He is now a widowed great-grandfather, and lives in Plymouth.

When war was declared, where were you? And how long was it before you were deployed to France?

It was a Sunday morning; we were having a church service up at Tavistock Guildhall with the old local Salvation Army band. 11 o'clock came and they said that there would be an important announcement. I think it was old [Neville] Chamberlain; he came on the wireless (as we called it) and said that they had given an ultimatum to Mr Hitler that if he didn't pull out of Poland then a state of war would be declared. He said that no such assurance had been given by Mr Hitler, and we were as a result, indeed at war with Germany. That was 11 o'clock on 3rd September. Some of the boys cheered and I wondered at the time what they were cheering at, because I knew then that it wasn't going to be a short affair: we were in for a pretty long haul, which indeed it was.

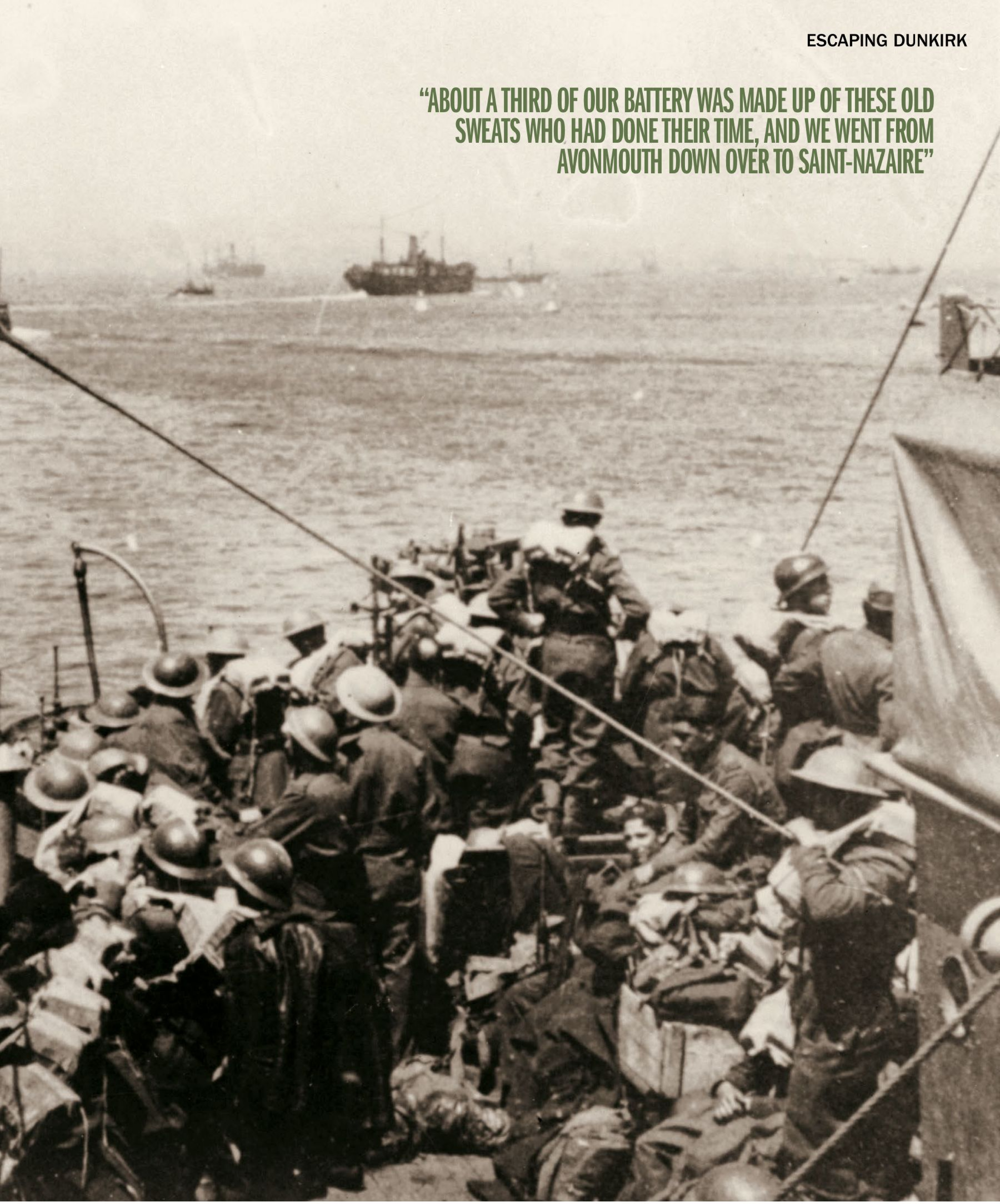
We were then on our bikes; we set off for Avonmouth on the Monday morning, and we left a lot of the young lads and the older boys behind. We just had a skeleton battery made up of people of the sort of age that would be expected to go to the front. We went up to Thursley camp to pick up some more vehicles, a couple more guns, and some reserves that had already done their 21 years in India. About a third of our battery was made up of these old sweats who had done their time, and we went from Avonmouth down over to Saint-Nazaire, landed there and unloaded.

■ *Garth was a veteran of Dunkirk, Monte Cassino and the Battle of Britain, serving throughout the whole of World War II*

How were you involved in France and Dunkirk?

We made our way up to Seclin, which is an airport by Lille, and our first job was in defence of the airport. [The Germans] set about the blitzkrieg lightning strike, and it was indeed. It came through us like a dose of salts; it came down through and circled us in no time, and the roads were choked up with refugees, civilians and things like that. Conditions were

"ABOUT A THIRD OF OUR BATTERY WAS MADE UP OF THESE OLD SWEATS WHO HAD DONE THEIR TIME, AND WE WENT FROM AVONMOUTH DOWN OVER TO SAINT-NAZAIRE"



“YOU COULD SEE THE BOMB LEAVE THE PLANE AND YOU KNEW DAMN WELL THAT IT WAS GOING TO LAND DIRECTLY ON YOUR GUN. WHAT DO YOU DO? SCARPER, OR DO YOU STICK IT OUT?”

made worse by Me 109s, which were coming over strafing, and Stukas dive-bombing. A lot of people will pee-pee the Stukas, but by God it was an effective plane. It was sure to hit the target: just aim the plane at the target and the only [marker] the gunner had was a little thin line coming down. You could see the bomb leave the plane, and you knew damn well that it was going to land directly on your gun. What do you do? Scarper, or do you stick it out? Well of course it was pretty frightening.

When we got to Dunkirk we were encircled, and the static guns on the sandbanks in Dunkirk all had a direct hit. Everybody picked that out first, so accordingly we went around as free agents up and down, keeping mobile all the time. The column was being led in by Ken Stephens, a despatch rider. He was leading the column into Dunkirk, and the Stukas made a mark of the head of the column, and poor old Ken was blown off his bike; [he was] killed by the side of the road. He was followed up by a 1500-weight, a sergeant, a gun-fitter and a driver. They were all killed, and the boy on the tailboards was severely injured. They are all in Dunkirk cemetery now; the bodies were found all right.

We kept on the move, keeping mobile up and down the beaches and getting into action, trying to give Jerry as much as he was giving us. We didn’t do a bad job. When Ken was killed, he was the despatch rider, and we had

Garth Wright was one of the lucky soldiers to be rescued at Dunkirk, to be ready to fight another day

Troops at the beach would dig trenches and stay there waiting for either the enemy or evacuation to come

no other riders around, so I took over the job, keeping touch with the outlying guns, and I did that for 48 hours or so between what we had for a headquarters in Dunkirk to the guns around Bray-Dunes. I did a little bit of despatch riding, then I dug in my own little pit, and eventually they shouted for volunteer stretcher-bearers. They say don't volunteer for anything, but I'm damn glad I did for this one. Me and another guy picked up what was left of some poor lad and took him out along the Mole that had been badly bombed but repaired, as much as you could, so you could still get access to the destroyer laying off there, the Codrington. We took this boy aboard [the destroyer] and we put him down. I went to go back to shore and the captain told me to stay on board. Well, I didn't argue too much with him, and I had a first class trip from Dunkirk to Dover. I consider myself damn lucky, so I got away from that one all right.

Dunkirk is known for the little ships that the troops used to evacuate, but was it better to be evacuated by naval ships?
Yeah, I was very lucky. I was just sitting, waiting for whatever came next, and they came for volunteers. I didn't know what it was for, but luckily it was to take this boy on the destroyer.

You were digging trenches on World War I battlefields. What was that like?

When we landed in Saint-Nazaire, we moved into Merville, and wherever we went we dug in and used our guns; that was the basic job to do. I was digging out a gun pit and every shovel full of earth that came up had a memento of the terrible battle from the First World War. Caps, badges, buttons, little bits of bone. What a terrible war that must have been, and I think that Merville was one of the spots that even in the First World War, it was one of the worst battles. [There were farmers] going around digging up shells and unexploded stuff, just parking it beside the field. I could see massive things, artillery pieces… it was everywhere.

When the Germans launched the campaign in 1940, it was a new style of warfare. What was it like to be on the receiving end of blitzkrieg? Did the speed alarm you?
It was really frightening. It was sort of men against boys really. They had armoured experiences on other fields of war in Poland and Czechoslovakia. They went through us like a dose of salts.

You say you were aware of the Germans' success in places like Poland and Czechoslovakia. Do you think you were prepared for the German attack?
We weren't prepared for that sort of warfare – the French in particular were still horse-drawn. We were not much in advance of them at all. It was a blitzkrieg all right.

Is it true that at night you could see Dunkirk because it was lit up?
At night there was a red glow in the sky. By day the oil tanks [which were one of the Germans' first targets] made this black plume of smoke a mile high that drifted along. Jerry used to come through that smoke and dive out of it down onto us. It was hell on earth on the beach itself.

Can you go into detail on what it was like to be on the beaches during the battle?
[The Germans' attack] was timed every half

hour. [They] would come over with their Me 109s and bomb us with Stukas – and you could set your watch by it. Every daylight hour – nothing [during the night], but as soon as dawn broke until sunset, [the Germans] were over. It was so damn frightening that I was beginning to wish that the next one would be mine: I'm not going to get out of this so let's get this over with. I honestly felt that way; it was terrifying.

How long were you on the beaches for?
I was up and down to the guns on the motorbike for a couple of days, and I was on the beaches for about 24 hours.

Is it true that a bullet hit your motorbike on one occasion?
When I was the only one who could do a bit of despatch riding – the other riders were killed – I took a bike and I was commuting between what we had as an HQ in Dunkirk to the outlying guns at Bray-Dunes. I used to have to go along the canal, and you could only get 49mph out of the old thing, and I used to [keep my] head down and just pray. Twice a blessed sniper had a go at me; once he hit the frame of the bike.

Did it stay in the bike?
No, it glanced, but I could see it on the frame.

Do you have any stories from when you were stationed in France?
We were guarding the airfield and word went around that the RAF had pulled out and took their planes, Spitfires and Hurricanes, back to England, and thank the Lord they did because they saved us during the blitz. Word went round that all their navi stuff was up there for the taking, so I went up and sure enough there were bottles of whisky, fags and lots of goodies, so I loaded that up. My daughters have said I didn't loot it, which of course I didn't: I saved it from the Germans. I took it back to my billet, but on the way, the CO Major Stephens, who liked a little tipple himself, was driving in. So by the time I got back, he was there and said: "I suppose you know what the penalty for looting in wartime is?" I said: "That's not looting sir; it's salvaged." He said: "Aye, but in my books that's looting, so get in this hut and I'll get the firing squad." I was biting my nails, and then Captain Harry Rogers came along and said: "What's all this about you looting?" I explained the situation and he said: "We mustn't let that get amongst the boys." He was in the First World War, and he said he'd seen this before – all the boys got drunk and the Germans just came in and wiped them up – so better put that in his billet.

Speaking of whisky, you got your only wound on the way to Dunkirk. Wasn't it something to do with whisky?
When [the captain] told me to put his whisky down in his billet, it had this twisted wire, I was throwing it down and it slashed my thumb. It was the wire that done the case of whisky up.

What did you do after that incident?
So I took my truck and I went down to HQ, and on the way I got cut off by Jerry. I was on my own. I stopped at a cafe, got a bottle of booze, sat on the step of the cafe, and as soon as I sat, dogs and kids came around. This French boy came up; I gave him a bar of chocolate from my so-called loot and we sat together. Then all of a sudden, up ahead at a T-junction, a truck went by with SS on board; they didn't take prisoners, so I thought it was time to move, so I made my way back to the ol' smoke at Dunkirk.

With regard to Germans themselves, obviously you were fighting them, but did you come across any Germans personally?
I had a sneaking regard for Jerry, not the SS, but I think the ordinary German soldier, he was as near to us as any other nationality. After we were mopping up in North Africa, we had them cornered up there in the desert. [There you had to] dig your own toilet. Of course there were no proper toilets, so you went away amongst the

"UP AHEAD AT A T-JUNCTION, A TRUCK WENT BY WITH SS ON BOARD; THEY DIDN'T TAKE PRISONERS, SO I THOUGHT IT WAS TIME TO MOVE, SO I MADE MY WAY BACK TO THE OL' SMOKE AT DUNKIRK"

Numerous small vessels were used to transport troops to larger battleships; these were called the 'little ships'

IWM

bushes somewhere and had your own dig-in toilet, and I was actually on that sort of job with my pants down and a Jerry chose that moment to come out and give himself up. He had a lovely BMW sidecar, so I sat in it [and] told him where to go for the regiment. He took me back, and turned out to be a butcher. He was a hell of a nice guy, and he stayed with us for about a week, helping in the cookhouse, then they came around collecting all these boys for the prison camp – they were going to Russia – and that boy literally cried. [He] begged us to stay, and I shed a tear for him; he was a hell of a nice guy.

So the average German wasn't like the SS – it was just a war?

The ordinary German was just the same as us. The SS were a different crowd; they were nasty devils.

When you look back at Dunkirk, obviously the German campaign was very fast and rapid. Did you attach any blame to your commanders in the fields, or did you just feel you were caught up in something you couldn't control?

We were all in the same boat: we just weren't ready for that type of warfare.

They talk about the miracle of Dunkirk. What do you make of that? Do you think it was a miracle?

I think it was. We came away to fight another day. It was only 350,000 of us that got away, but it was the nucleus of the British army. There's a program on now, *SS-GB*, which is about if the Germans had indeed overrun us and what would it be like here, but it's pretty gory. I think that's the sort of life that we would have had if it weren't for the miracle of Dunkirk.

When it comes to the evacuation, it's famous for the little ships that came. Did you think it was a relief or did you wonder what they were doing?

There was a bloomin' great queue for the little boats, and I thought: 'I'm not going out and waiting for that'. I just stuck in my trench and waited for I don't know what. I picked the right deal, I think; quite a lot got away with the little ships.

British soldiers arrive back in England after being successfully evacuated from Dunkirk

THE CURTAIN FALLS AT DUNKIRK

FROM 1-4 JUNE 1940, THE GREATEST SEALIFT EVACUATION IN MILITARY HISTORY CONCLUDED, A COSTLY BUT RESOUNDING SUCCESS IN THE MIDST OF WRENCHING DEFEAT

The incredible rescue of thousands of soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and Allied troops from the beaches and the harbour of Dunkirk on the English Channel coast of France remains one of the great wartime epics in human history. For more than a week, vessels of every description – warships of the British Royal Navy and the French Navy, little boats pressed into service, some of them manned by British civilians, Dutch fishing boats and trawlers, Belgian and even Polish watercraft – ferried thousands of fighting men to safety, who otherwise would have died or languished in German prison camps.

The success of the mission was helped by several factors, including the heroism of the British and French soldiers, who valiantly sacrificed themselves in rearguard defence of the beachhead; the relentless determination of Royal Navy and Royal Air Force (RAF) personnel, who bravely dodged Luftwaffe bombs and took on enemy fighter planes; and the contributions of civilians in the little ships and at the receiving ports of Dover and other points such as Ramsgate and Margate. Another source of assistance came from the most unlikely person: Adolf Hitler himself. Perhaps preoccupied with the continuing conquest of France and relying on the advice of his closest associate, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, who promised that his Luftwaffe could finish off the BEF, Hitler halted offensive operations for a full day on 23 May 1940, and forbade his armoured forces from attacking the British perimeter at Dunkirk from 24-26 May. The respite allowed the evacuation to gain momentum and produce results well beyond the expectations of those who planned it on a shoestring and incredibly quickly.

By 1 June 1940, Operation Dynamo had been in full swing for five days, evacuating men in daylight when it was possible, and through the night when it wasn't, under the command of Royal Navy captain William George Tennant, senior naval officer ashore at Dunkirk. Still, the soldiers came down to the dunes and waited in the water or shuffled to the East Mole for loading aboard the packed decks of ships of every description. The operation reached its climax during the next 72 hours, but these were hard days indeed.

By 1 June, many Allied rescue ships had made at least six round trips from Dunkirk to various ports in England

Children rush towards men returning from Dunkirk, offering them welcome gifts of cigarettes and food

HEROISM IN THE PERIMETER

Captain Marcus Ervine-Andrews received the Victoria Cross for valour under fire

Irish-born Captain Marcus Ervine-Andrews of the 1st Battalion, East Lancashire Regiment, fought like a lion in the defensive perimeter at Dunkirk. Commanding an infantry company during the early morning of 1 June 1940, the 28-year-old officer responded quickly when his unit came under heavy fire as the Germans crossed the Canal de Bergues, a 13-kilometre-long waterway connecting the interior community of Bergues with the port of Dunkirk and the English Channel.

As the enemy advanced, Ervine-Andrews asked for volunteers, and with a handful of soldiers, took to the roof of a barn. From this vantage point, the little band of defenders shot 17 German soldiers with their rifles, and then employed a Bren gun to mow down many more. When the barn caught fire, the captain ordered his wounded soldiers to retire and then personally covered the withdrawal of the remaining eight men under his command.

Ervine-Andrews attained the rank of lieutenant colonel, and was the last Irishman to receive the Victoria Cross in World War II. He returned to Ireland after the war, but was forced to leave his native land by the IRA. He made his home in Cornwall and died in 1995 at the age of 83.

Streams of men embark one of the many vessels involved in Operation Dynamo

WAKE-WALKER'S WORRIES

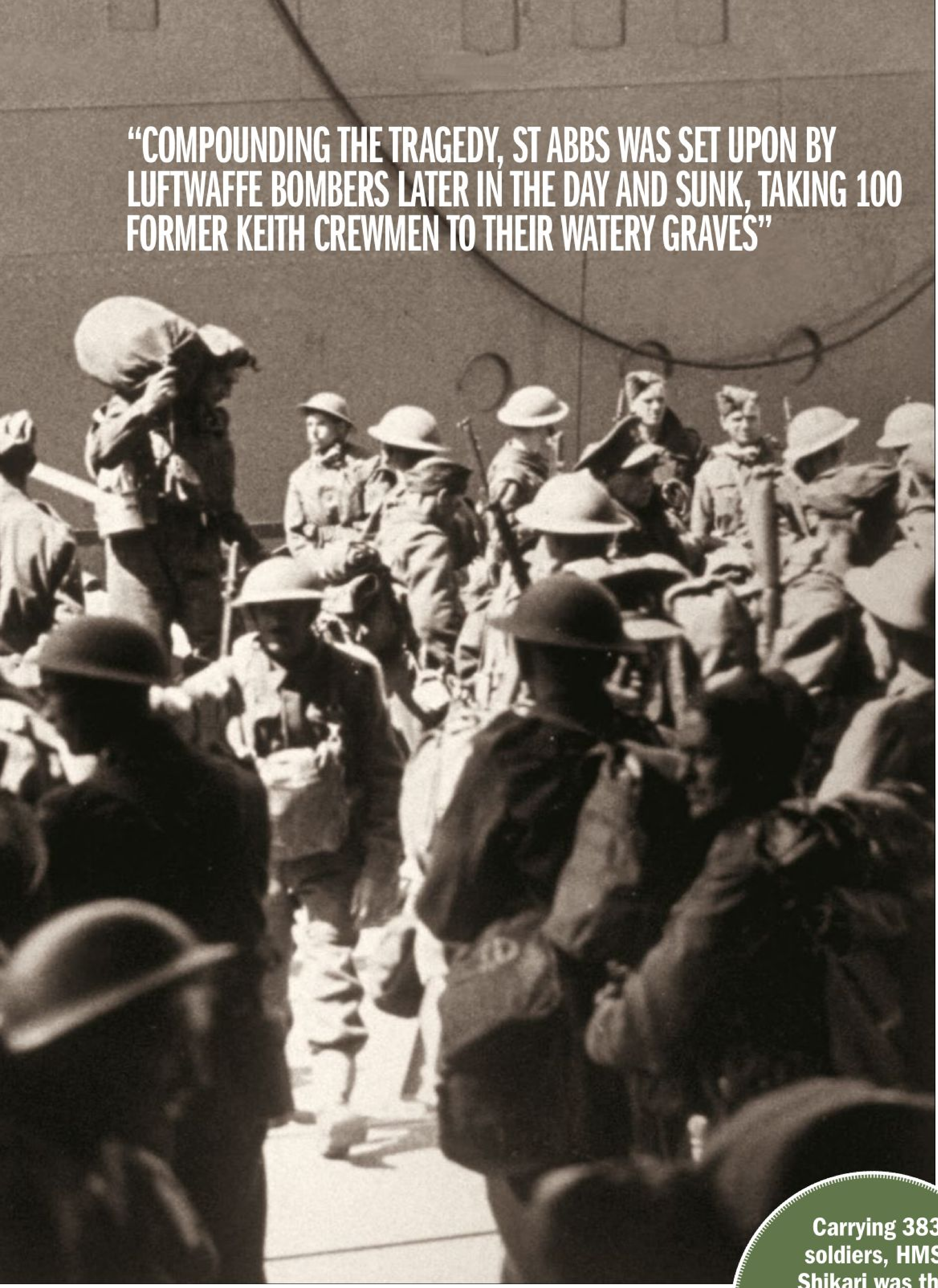
Rear Admiral William Frederic Wake-Walker, in charge of all ships operating off the French-Belgian coastline, stood on the bridge of the destroyer HMS Keith on the morning of 1 June. His concerns were significant – including responsibility for the safe passage of BEF commander Lord Gort from the continent to England, and maintaining the pace of the continuing evacuation. Lord Gort left HMS Keith in the hours of the early morning and reached London later in the day.

Captain DJR Simpson, Keith's skipper, had been killed when mortar and small-arms fire raked the destroyer as it swept in to blast enemy artillery positions during the defence of Boulogne several days earlier, and on the morning of 1 June, Keith was under the command of Captain EL Berthon, who had directed accurate gunfire against German artillery positions around Dunkirk throughout the previous day.

With Gort gone, Wake-Walker turned to other business, but the Luftwaffe interrupted. Just after sunrise, several enemy fighters appeared in the distance and made strafing runs across the beach. Soldiers scattered for cover and returned to their places in an orderly fashion when the immediate threat had passed. By 8am, the crew of HMS Keith had fought off one attack by German dive bombers, but soon enough the Stukas returned with a vengeance.

Four lines of Luftwaffe dive bombers, numbering perhaps 60 gull-winged Stukas, plummeted from numerous points on the compass. Aboard the targeted Keith, seaman Ian Nethercott watched with a strange mixture of awe and terror. "I just suddenly saw this Stuka appearing over the bridge – it seemed to be almost touching it – and this great big bloody yellow bomb fell from its clamps. It was a thousand pounder… We were moving to starboard, and he dropped it down the port side. It didn't land on us, but it blew a part of the port side in."

While sailors hammered away at the raiders with 2-pounder anti-aircraft guns and anything else that would point skyward, another bomb detonated just off Keith's stern, jamming the helm and leaving it turning in a circle. A third bomb fell straight down the destroyer's second funnel, exploding in the No 2 boiler room, snuffing out all power and killing everyone in the vicinity. The destroyer dropped anchor, and the order to abandon ship was given.



“COMPOUNDING THE TRAGEDY, ST ABBS WAS SET UPON BY LUFTWAFFE BOMBERS LATER IN THE DAY AND SUNK, TAKING 100 FORMER KEITH CREWMEN TO THEIR WATERY GRAVES”

Carrying 383 soldiers, HMS Shikari was the last ship out of Dunkirk harbour at the conclusion of Operation Dynamo

Admiral Wake-Walker transferred his flag temporarily to the swift motor torpedo boat MTB-102, which may well have become the smallest Royal Navy vessel in history to actually serve as an operational flagship. It was apparent that Keith was doomed, and the Admiralty tug St Abbs pulled close in an effort to evacuate the 130 survivors, including several members of Gort’s staff who were still aboard. By now, 36 sailors were already dead, but compounding the tragedy, St Abbs was set upon by Luftwaffe bombers later in the day and sunk, taking 100 former Keith crewmen to their watery graves.

Keith was not alone among the Royal Navy casualties on that bloody 1 June. The destroyer HMS Basilisk was sunk with nine sailors killed. The destroyer HMS Havant took two bombs in its engine room while another detonated beneath the hull, killing eight crewmen and at least 25 soldiers who were up on the deck. Havant was so thoroughly damaged that the minesweeper HMS Saltash removed the crew and then scuttled the burning hulk.

The minesweeper HMS Skipjack had taken 275 soldiers aboard when 10 Junkers Ju 88 twin-engine bombers swept in to drop three bombs on the small vessel. Skipjack capsized just before 9am, remained afloat for about 20 minutes, and then plunged to the bottom of the harbour with many of the soldiers aboard trapped beneath the hull. Most of them died along with 19 sailors, and Luftwaffe aircraft reportedly strafed the survivors in the water.

Two miles off Dunkirk at midday, the French destroyer HMS Foudroyant was attacked by Stukas and Heinkel He 111 level bombers. Three 250-kilogram bombs hit the ship, breaking its keel. Foudroyant rolled over and sank, and 19 of the crew were killed. Fortunately, since Foudroyant was inbound to Dunkirk, its decks were not crowded with rescued soldiers.

THE LITTLE SHIPS

These morning losses were appalling. At 1.45pm, Admiral Bertram Ramsay, overall commander of Operation Dynamo, ordered all destroyers out of the combat zone. Incredibly, a total of 64,429 soldiers were evacuated on 1 June, including 47,081 at the East Mole and 17,348 off the beach. The Solent steamer Whippingham had transported 2,700 men to safety singlehandedly. The little boats that dashed to the beaches on that harrowing Saturday had pulled an average of 280 men per hour from every mile of beach that remained in Allied control.

While the port of Dover handled primarily larger ships, the smaller craft were busily swarming in and out of Margate and Ramsgate and other points. By mid-morning on 1 June alone, Ramsgate had received 24 small vessels with 4,356 evacuees aboard. When Operation Dynamo concluded, more than 43,000 rescued soldiers had come ashore at Ramsgate.

While estimates of the number of Allied ships participating in the sealift peak at about the 900 mark, some sources relate that more than 600 of these were counted among the fabled ‘little ships’.

GORT REPORTS

As Admiral Ramsay issued his recall order to the embattled Royal Navy destroyers and other warships off Dunkirk, Lord Gort arrived at Downing Street in London. Prime minister Winston Churchill congratulated the commander on his skilful defensive retreat and the success of the ongoing evacuation, which would actually save the core of the British Army to fight another day.

During the 45 minutes that followed, Gort described the operations of the BEF in expansive detail. Former prime minister Neville Chamberlain later wrote of the meeting: “Gort got back this morning and gave us a thrilling account of the whole operation. There seems to have been hardly any mistake that the French did not make.”

Of course, the Battle of France was ongoing, and there would be more time later for a thorough and in-depth assessment of command and troop performance. At the time, however, it certainly must be acknowledged that French troops, particularly those of the XVI Corps, were fighting valiantly to hold the perimeter at Dunkirk. For example, from 29 May to 4 June, the 12th Motorised Infantry Division committed its 8,000 soldiers to the effort with orders to “hold your present position at all costs to the last man and last round. This is essential in order that a vitally important operation can take place.”

TITANIC OFFICER IN HARM'S WAY

The former 2nd officer of the ill-fated liner Titanic took his little ship to Dunkirk

On 15 April 1912, Charles H Lightoller, 2nd officer of the RMS Titanic, survived the sinking of the great passenger liner. Then 28 years later, Lightoller took his personal motor yacht, Sundowner (just 16-metres long), to sea during Operation Dynamo, the epic rescue of Allied troops from Dunkirk in 1940. Late on the afternoon of 1 June, Lightoller gave instructions to the men piling into Sundowner. "Having passed the word for every man to lie down and not to move, the same applied on deck," he recalled. "By the time we had 50 on deck I could feel her getting distinctly tender so took no more. Actually we had 130 on board."

Lightoller and Sundowner survived the peril of Dunkirk. The courageous seaman died in 1952 at the age of 78. Sundowner was restored in 1990, and is on display in Ramsgate's Royal Harbour near the local Maritime Museum.

As the rescue effort progressed, concerns arose within the beleaguered French government that British soldiers were actually being evacuated in much larger numbers than French troops. Prime minister Paul Reynaud and Churchill had already discussed the situation during an earlier meeting.

By 2 June, only about 4,000 soldiers of the BEF rearguard, and a considerably larger number of French troops remained ashore in the vicinity of Dunkirk. But the losses sustained on 1 June compelled Admiral Ramsay to suspend all rescue operations at 7am with the hope of resuming after dark. Plans to conclude Operation Dynamo by first light on 2 June were discarded, and the evacuation window would remain open for at least another 24 hours.

With the bulk of the BEF already out of France, a total of 26,256 men were removed from the beaches and the East Mole on 2 June. As the day started to progress, the remaining

SMOKING
2908
3
3
3
3

British soldiers filtered through the perimeter held by the fighting French. Then, resisting German pressure to the best of their ability, the French set about instigating their own retrograde movement.

With 2 June being a Sunday, a British chaplain conducted services on the beach, including Holy Communion. German aircraft flew in to bomb and strafe, interrupting the service five times, but the intrepid chaplain persevered until the services were concluded.

NIP AND TUCK

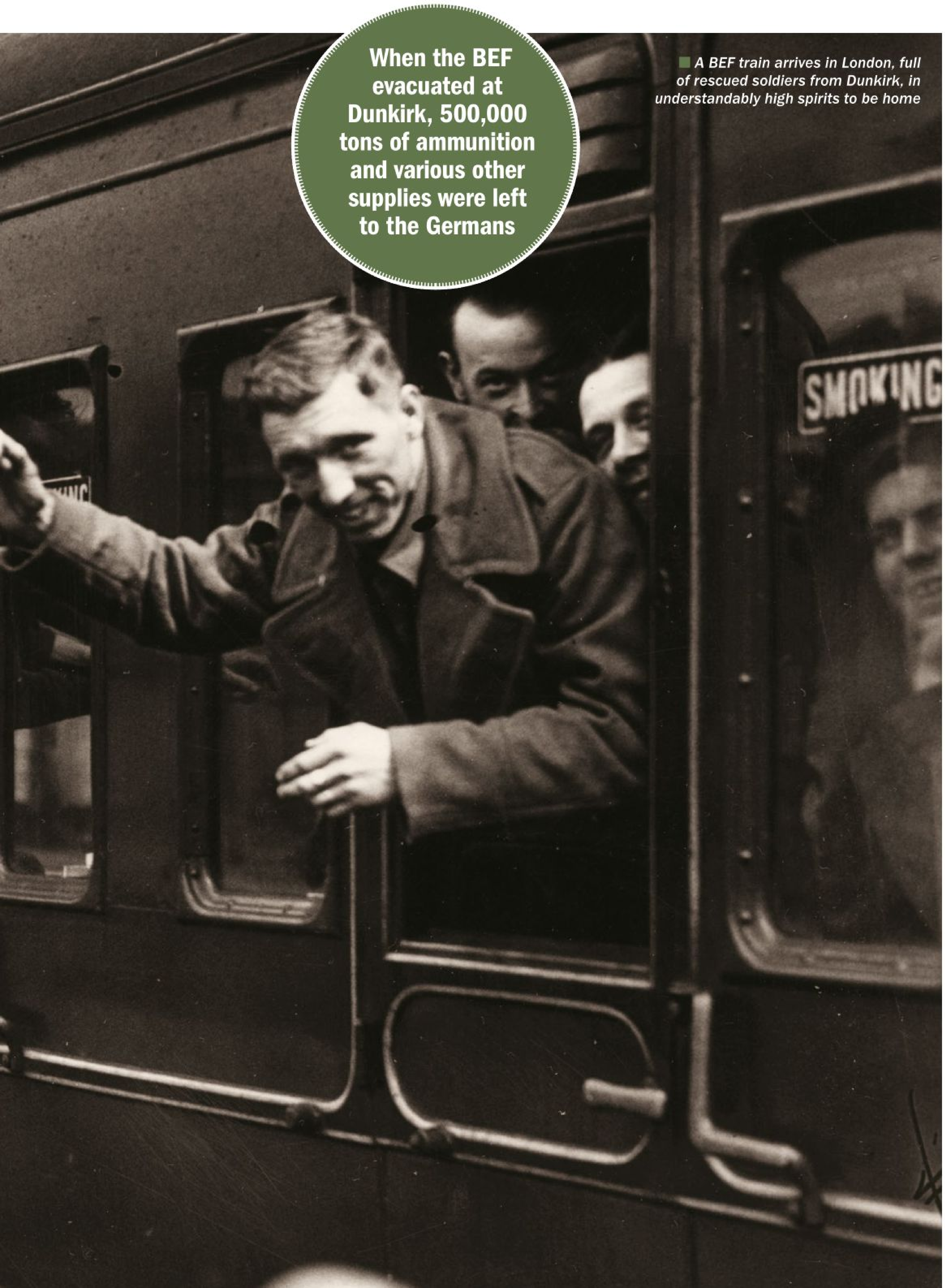
The pilots of the Royal Air Force flew thousands of sorties during Operation Dynamo, attempting to engage Luftwaffe aircraft as far from the beaches and Dunkirk harbour as possible. As the sun rose on 2 June, Supermarine Spitfires and Hawker Hurricanes took off from airfields in south England on dawn patrol. Scanning the skies over the Channel coast for German planes, they found few. Most of the pilots turned for home – and breakfast – without firing their guns.

A short time later, however, pilots of Nos 66, 92, 266 and 611 Squadrons, perhaps flying as many as 50 RAF fighters, were back in the air. It was 23-year-old flight lieutenant Robert Stanford Tuck who led the big flight. Around 8am, he pressed an attack against three Heinkell He 111 bombers.

Out of nowhere, several German Messerschmitt Me-109 fighters jumped the young pilot. Machine gun bullets chewed into the tail section of his Spitfire, but Stanford Tuck turned the tables and sent one enemy fighter spinning out of control. He then turned back toward an He 111, shot it down, and watched the crew's parachutes billow as they jumped for their lives. During another brief brawl with Me-109s, Stanford Tuck damaged two of the enemy planes. Within the hour, he was safely on the ground at his home field, RAF Martlesham.

The RAF tally that morning included 14 Luftwaffe planes shot down, and 21 more damaged. However, Stanford Tuck's command sustained grievous losses as well. Five pilots were killed in action. Five others were shot down and survived, one of them taken prisoner. Two of the dead pilots, Ken Crompton and Donald Little from No 611 West Lancashire Squadron, were newlyweds, both in their early 20s.

While their husbands fought and died in the skies over Dunkirk, the 19-year-old brides of Crompton and Little were attending a breakfast given by the squadron commander for those wives whose husbands had lost their lives. As those gathered sombrely sipped champagne, word reached these two that they were now widows as well.



A BEF train arrives in London, full of rescued soldiers from Dunkirk, in understandably high spirits to be home

When the BEF evacuated at Dunkirk, 500,000 tons of ammunition and various other supplies were left to the Germans

FINAL HOURS

Late on the morning of 2 June, Admiral Ramsay signalled: "The final evacuation is staged for tonight, and the Nation looks to the Navy to see this through." Under cover of darkness, the last of the organised BEF rearguard boarded boats and departed the embattled coast of France. As many as 20,000 French troops expected to reach the evacuation area failed to appear due to command and logistics issues in the face of continuing German pressure.

At 11.30pm, Ramsay received the message: "B.E.F. Evacuated. Returning now."

Tennant used a megaphone to shout for any remaining British soldiers. Finally satisfied that the job was complete, he radioed Ramsay at 10.50am on 3 June: "Operation completed; returning to Dover." In reality, there were still well over 100,000 British troops in France. Among these was the 51st Highland Division, detailed to support the French defenders of the Maginot Line and actually under French command, which eventually surrendered to the Germans.

Prime minister Churchill remained concerned by the large number of French troops still in the vicinity of Dunkirk, and as the last BEF soldiers stepped onto boats, the Germans had closed to within three kilometres of the harbour. On the evening of 3 June, the Royal Navy returned to Dunkirk, taking another 26,746 soldiers out of harm's way. Still, thousands of French soldiers remained ashore.

Around 10.15pm that evening, the destroyer HMS Whitsed led the final evacuation foray to Dunkirk. The effort concluded in the early hours of the morning on 4 June, and another 26,175 soldiers, most of them French, were rescued. Operation Dynamo was officially concluded at 2.23pm that afternoon.

Shortly after 10am on 4 June, German troops began filtering into Dunkirk, rounding up approximately 40,000 surrendering French soldiers. The bodies of the dead lay strewn everywhere. British casualties alone included 68,111 killed, wounded or captured. The wreckage of an army, more than 2,000 artillery pieces and 60,000 vehicles, were abandoned. At least 240 ships had been sunk, including six Royal Navy and three French destroyers.

Hitler's order of the day for 5 June 1940 crowed: "Soldiers of the West Front! Dunkirk has fallen… with it has ended the greatest battle in world history. Soldiers! My confidence in you knows no bounds."

However, 338,226 British and French soldiers had escaped the clutches of the Nazis. Many of the French troops were repatriated within days, and took part in the final battles before the capitulation of their country. With the long shadow of defeat hanging over it, Operation Dynamo was nevertheless labelled a triumph.

Although quietly exultant with the spectacular achievement of Operation Dynamo that had surpassed all expectations, Churchill rose in the House of Commons on 4 June and spoke frankly, delivering one of the most stirring speeches in British history. He reminded the gathering that the German Army had swept across France and Belgium "like a sharp scythe…" and admonished, "We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations."

The prime minister added with steely resolve that the prospect of a German invasion was real, but it would be resisted through to ultimate victory. "We shall go on to the end," he intoned. "We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

The road to victory in World War II, achieved five long years later, was arduous indeed, but it may be concluded that it began in "glorious defeat" at Dunkirk.

Approximately 140,000 of the Allied soldiers successfully rescued during Operation Dynamo were French

"ANOTHER 26,175 SOLDIERS, MOST OF THEM FRENCH, WERE RESCUED. OPERATION DYNAMO WAS OFFICIALLY CONCLUDED AT 2.23PM THAT AFTERNOON"

RAILWAY
HENRY

ICONIC MOMENT

A group of evacuated troops (one of whom is wearing a captured German helmet) are served tea and sandwiches by a member of the First Air Nursing Yeomanry at Addison Road Station, London.

TELFER LTD

As a senior officer of many years' service in the German army, Gerd von Rundstedt had Adolf Hitler's respect

KEY PLAYER

GERD VON RUNDSTEDT

AFTER LIFELONG MILITARY SERVICE, VON RUNDSTEDT SEIZED THE SUDETENLAND UNOPPOSED IN 1938, AND RETIRED. THEN WORLD WAR II HAPPENED

Of the myriad decisions made by individuals that gave rise to Dunkirk, few have been more debated than the one often referred to as 'Hitler's Panzer Halt Order'. In fact, though it was sanctioned by the Führer, it wasn't his idea at all. The man principally responsible for it was a veteran army careerist, recently recalled from retirement, known as Gerd von Rundstedt.

Born in Aschersleben in the German Empire on 12 December 1875, Karl Rudolf Gerd von Rundstedt was the son of an aristocratic Prussian cavalry officer. He joined the army as a cadet in 1892, and was sufficiently impressive to be accepted into the German Army's officer training school at Berlin in 1903. He completed the course, demonstrating abilities that marked him out for the army general staff, which he joined in 1907.

Promoted to the rank of captain in 1909, von Rundstedt was chief of staff to the 22nd Infantry Division at the outbreak of World War I. He saw some action, particularly on the eastern front, though as a staff officer he was largely held behind battle lines. Nevertheless, he earned an Iron Cross first class, finished the war at the rank of major, and remained one of the few officers permitted to be retained in the slimmed-down post-war German army, the Reichswehr.

Much later, at the Nuremberg trials, following the second global conflict, von Rundstedt testified as a witness that army officers did not concern themselves with political discussion or debate. His view that the role of the army was not to interfere in politics other than to support the government of the day did, perhaps conveniently, serve him well during the turbulent 1920s and 1930s in Germany for, in those interwar years, von Rundstedt rose steadily through the army ranks. By the time Hitler became chancellor in 1933, von Rundstedt was a lieutenant general, in the upper echelons of the military.

Hitler's desire for a strong army was endorsed by von Rundstedt, as was the Führer's push for re-armament contrary to the Treaty of Versailles. The veteran officer was less enthusiastic, from a military point of view, about Hitler's plans to reclaim areas of Czechoslovakia, yet at the same time he steadfastly refused to support others in the army who sought to challenge the Führer over them. Subsequently, it was von Rundstedt himself who led the 2nd Army as it marched unopposed into the Sudetenland to occupy it in 1938.

Shortly after, aged nearly 63 and not in the best of health, von Rundstedt retired. Hitler granted him the honorary post of colonel of the 18th Infantry Regiment. An old soldier unable to just fade away, however, by the spring of 1939, with plans being made for an invasion east into Poland, von Rundstedt was summoned from retirement to command Army Group South's incursion into the country. Utilising blitzkrieg tactics, the conquest of Poland was achieved swiftly, particularly once the Soviet Union also attacked the country after secret agreements were made in a non-aggression pact with Germany.

During the Polish campaign, von Rundstedt's chief of staff was Lieutenant General Erich von Manstein. When it came to formulating proposals for Germany to attack to the west, von Rundstedt backed the ideas of von Manstein. His chief of staff suggested invading Holland and Belgium to lure French and British forces to the north east. At the same time, a second attack of large armoured formations through the Ardennes, if accomplished quickly enough, could cross the River Meuse and slice across France, trapping the Allied forces confronting the first attack. As it came with von Rundstedt's approval, Hitler finally adopted von Manstein's plan.

Command of Army Group A, the force striking through the Ardennes, was given to von Rundstedt. The offensive was launched on 10 May 1940. By 14 May, panzer forces had crossed the Meuse and had pierced the inadequate French defensive line. They did not linger, in Heinz Guderian's case not even to wait for his infantry, but lunged forward at pace, striking out for the coast. So rapid was the advance that it unnerved even the Germans. Fearing the flanks of the thrust were open to counter-attack, von Rundstedt ordered the charging tanks to stop advancing on 16 May. The supremely self-confident Guderian found ways to keep moving, however, and four days later he had reached the English Channel, cutting the Allied forces in France in half.

A spirited flank counter-attack by the Allies did begin at Arras on 21 May. Initially effective in that it threatened to isolate the

1 SEPTEMBER 1939
Von Rundstedt returned to service as commander of Army Group South for the incursion into Poland. By taking such a role, he was committed to fight for the restoration of German pride, even if that resulted in a second global war.

Von Rundstedt (left) at a memorial service in Berlin, 1934

© Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-01817A / CC-BY-SA 3.0

■ *Commander and dictators: von Rundstedt, left, with Mussolini, centre, and Hitler, right, on the eastern front in 1941*

© Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1987-121-09A / CC-BY-SA 3.0

panzer forces spearheading the drive across France, it was eventually snuffed out once the Germans rallied. Crucially, however, the German high command was compelled to react. Some advancing units were summoned back to help stabilise the situation at Arras, while von Rundstedt ordered the panzer units not to advance any further on 24 May after receiving requests from field generals to allow the infantry to catch up with the 'fast troops'. Such a pause, von Rundstedt also considered, allowed the depleted panzer units to rest and bring repairable vehicles back to the front line.

Hitler visited von Rundstedt's HQ in Charleville, France. They discussed how best to tackle the Allied forces hemmed in around Dunkirk. Hitler viewed conserving the panzer forces for later battles in France to be of overriding importance, particularly as the Luftwaffe was available to finish the job. Thus the Führer fully endorsed von Rundstedt's pause, and a direct order bearing the dictator's name was thereby issued to confirm it.

As the offensive against the western and southern flank of the trapped Allies did not begin again until 26 May, the besieged forces were given valuable time to organise a defensive evacuation. Many consider the pause to be a key moment of the entire conflict, as more than 330,000 Allied troops subsequently escaped. At war's end, in his memoirs, von Rundstedt pinned the blunder entirely upon Hitler, though this was disingenuous, as the general – for valid and understandable reasons it can be said – had by that point already initiated and sanctioned the period of respite.

The battle for France concluded on 22 June following the armistice with Germany. Less than a month later, von Rundstedt was promoted to field marshall. He was tasked with overseeing Operation Sea Lion, the proposed invasion of Britain, though that was abandoned after the Luftwaffe failed to defeat the Royal Air Force. Next, when Hitler terminated the non-aggression pact with Stalin, von Rundstedt was ordered east to take part in Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union. Commanding Army Group South, von Rundstedt's forces swept through Ukraine. Kiev was captured in September 1941, Kharkov fell in October, and Rostov in November. Yet von Rundstedt suffered a mild heart attack during the push for Rostov, and a harsh winter was beginning to bite. The field marshall argued for a halt in the advance, as supply lines were stretched and the weather was worsening. Hitler would have none of it. In the face of a Soviet counter-attack at Rostov, von Rundstedt sort to fall back, but again the Führer disagreed with his commander. Digging his heels in, von Rundstedt suggested he be replaced if he no longer held Hitler's confidence. Hitler agreed this time, and the field marshall became the first member of Germany's high command to be dismissed during World War II.

“MANY CONSIDER THE PAUSE TO BE A KEY MOMENT OF THE ENTIRE CONFLICT, AS MORE THAN 330,000 ALLIED TROOPS SUBSEQUENTLY ESCAPED. AT WAR'S END, IN HIS MEMOIRS, VON RUNDSTEDT PINNED THE BLUNDER ENTIRELY UPON HITLER”

21 MAY 1940
Panzer commander Erwin Rommel reported that he was under attack from “hundreds of enemy tanks” at Arras. While exaggerating numbers, Rommel's claims prompted caution in the German high command, including from von Rundstedt.

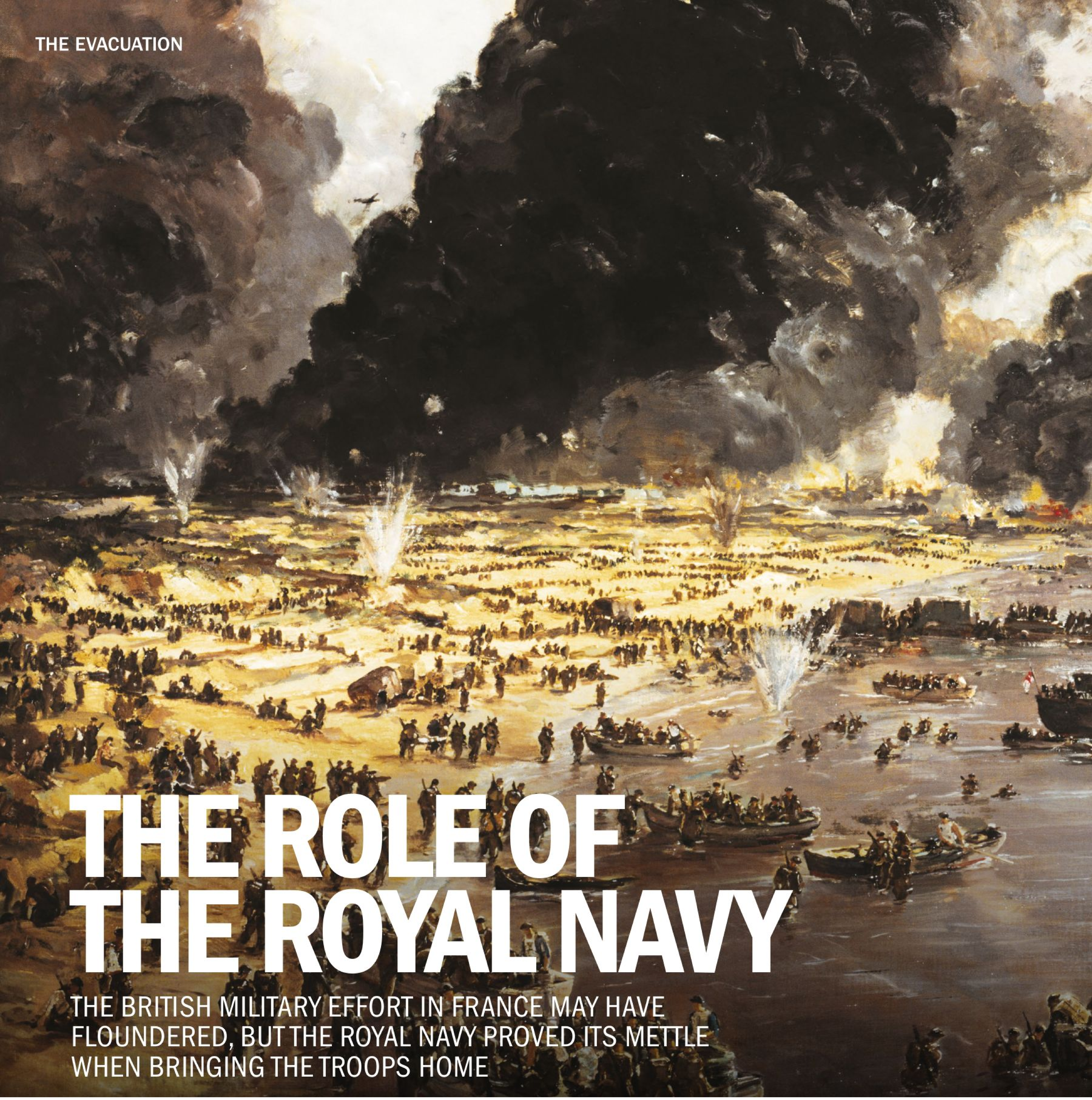
When Hitler's commander in France, Erwin von Witzleben needed to be replaced in March 1942, he re-instated von Rundstedt. Charged with defending Germany's western front from invasion, von Rundstedt was in command when the Allied raid on Dieppe was repulsed in August of the same year. The D-Day landings of 1944 were entirely different, however. When it became clear the Allies could not be contained, he began lobbying for a peace initiative, and was promptly dismissed again.

Following the failed assassination attempt against Hitler in July 1944, von Rundstedt, viewed as loyal and trustworthy, was recalled a third time. Despite that, a final dismissal occurred the following spring when he once again suggested making peace overtures. He was captured in May 1945 by US troops.

Some, including General Eisenhower, considered von Rundstedt to have been one of Germany's ablest commanders, while others sought to have him tried for war crimes committed on the eastern front. Though held captive for several years, poor health and age meant a trial was avoided, and he lived as a free man until his death in 1953.

Von Rundstedt dedicated his life to serving the German army, and did all he could to protect his men, even if it got him dismissed

24 MAY 1940
The crucial directive halting panzer advances came in Hitler's name, yet it was initiated by von Rundstedt. Made to give hard-fighting forces some rest, it also inadvertently allowed the Allies to begin an evacuation operation from Dunkirk.



THE ROLE OF THE ROYAL NAVY

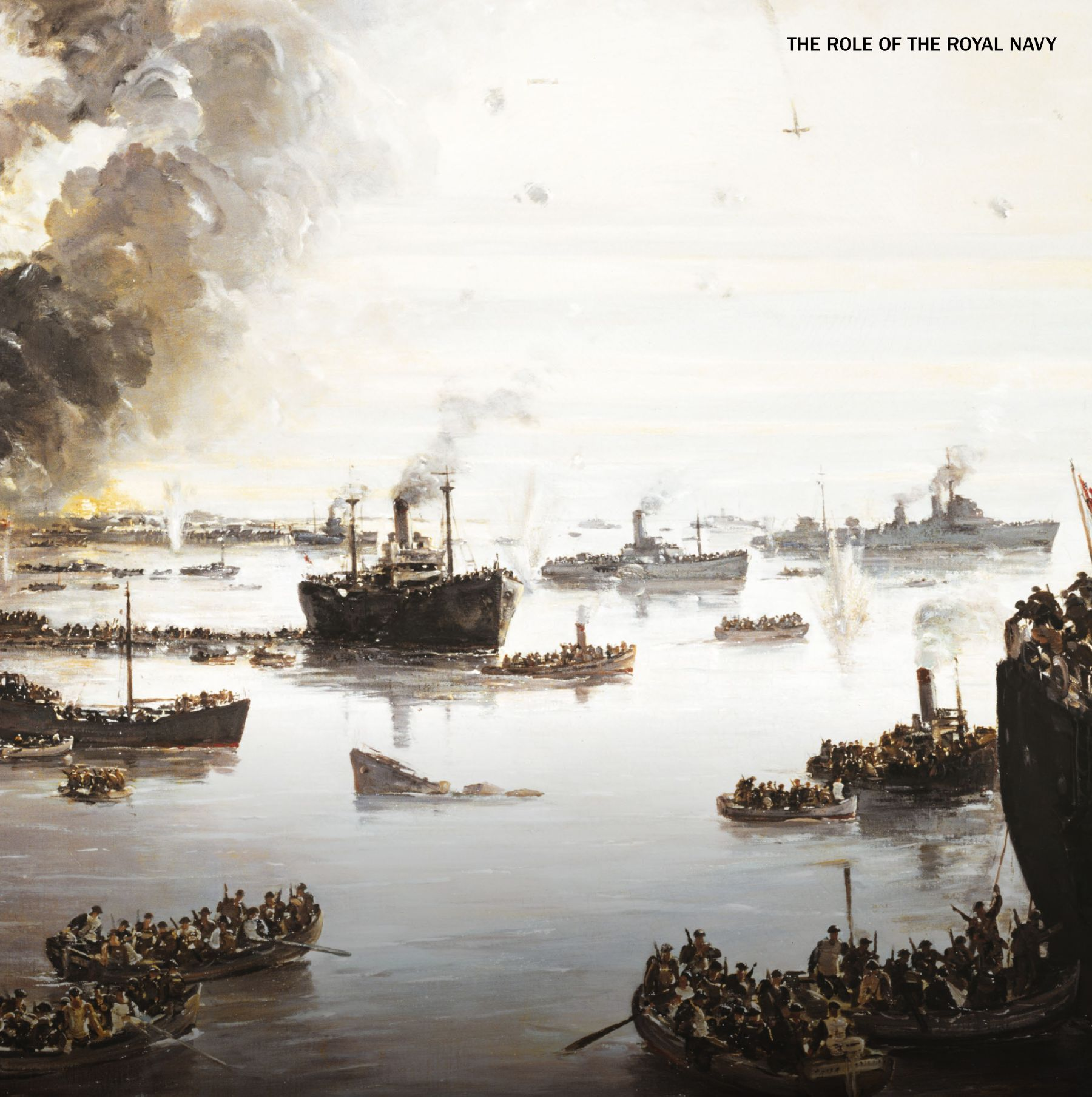
THE BRITISH MILITARY EFFORT IN FRANCE MAY HAVE FLOUNDERED, BUT THE ROYAL NAVY PROVED ITS METTLE WHEN BRINGING THE TROOPS HOME

Operation Dynamo was a masterclass in improvisation and, despite the Admiralty's best efforts at forward planning, its success hinged on the initiative and quick thinking of those involved. Certainly, the Admiralty should shoulder no blame for the lack of extensive preparation – Fall Gelb, the German assault on the West, moved so swiftly that all of Europe was caught off guard.

Indeed, the need to evacuate the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) from France was not fully discussed until 19 May, a mere week before Operation Dynamo was put into effect. Even on 24 May it was unclear whether the BEF would require rescue and return. Then, when the Admiralty ordered the evacuation, the situation had become so perilous it was estimated that only 45,000 troops would be rescued across a two-day period before the enemy closed in and took control.

In fact, by the time the operation closed, more than 338,000 troops were returned in an operation that spanned nine days. The Royal Navy and the armada of merchant and private vessels had achieved the near impossible.

It began under inauspicious circumstance. Vice-Admiral Bertram Ramsay was shocked to realise he had just 40 destroyers, one of which was the Polish warship Błyskawica. By modern-day standards this might seem a sizeable number, but it amounted to just one-fifth of the Royal Navy's total at the time, with so many destroyers already committed to operations in the North Sea, on the Atlantic convoys, in the Mediterranean and in the Far East.



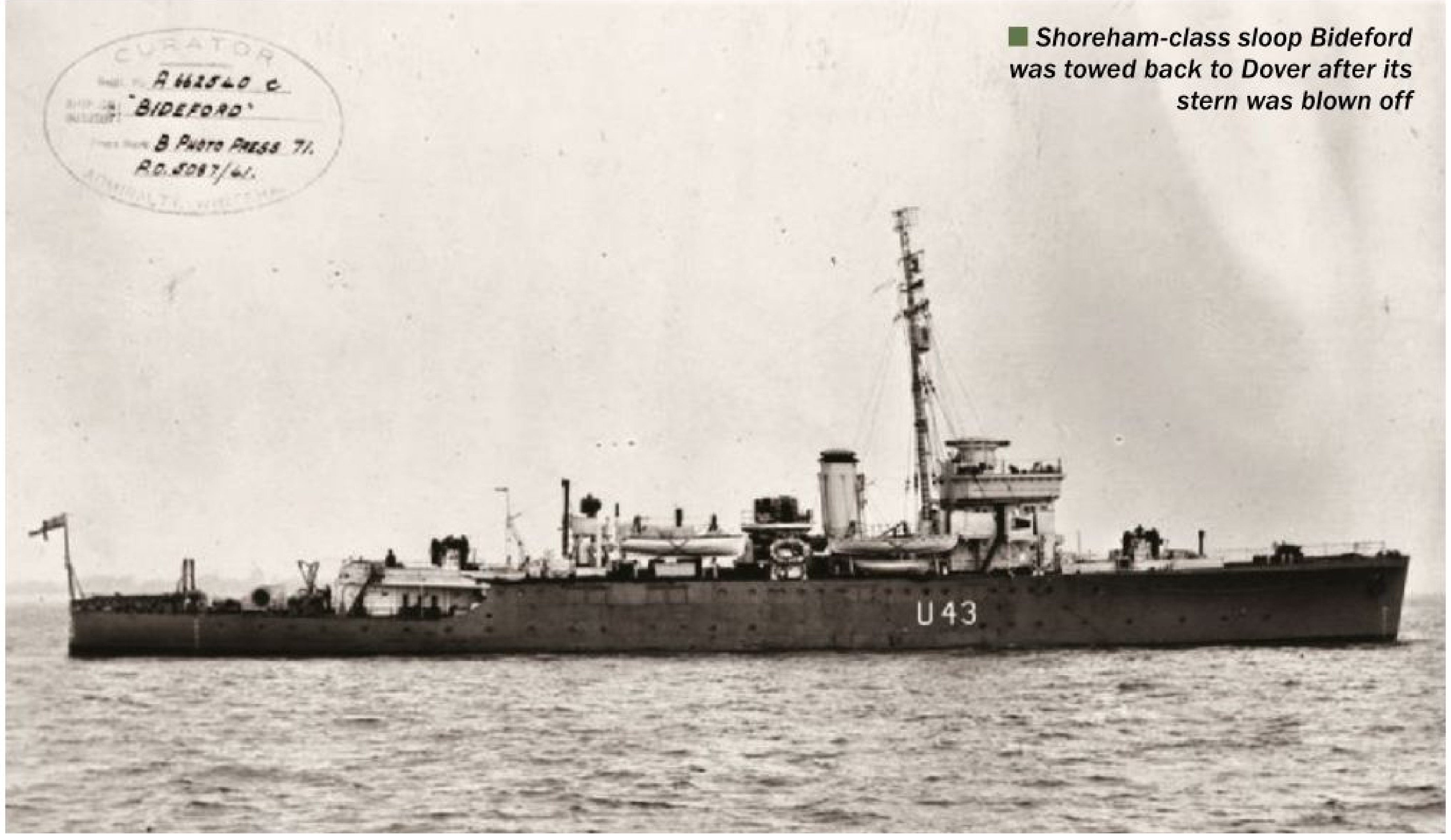
The destroyers would be the key component in the evacuation bid. They were not ideal carriers for troops, but their speed and manoeuvrability made them difficult targets for enemy naval or air attack. Their firepower was important too, especially when it came to warding off enemy aircraft.

Ramsay could bolster the destroyers with 38 minesweepers and 61 minesweeping craft, the anti-aircraft cruiser Calcutta, 18 anti-submarine trawlers, six corvettes, a sloop, seven hospital ships (converted from ferries) and 79 other smaller craft, such as motor torpedo boats and some gunboats.

In addition, a clutch of French, Belgian and Dutch ships were made available, as well as an armada of merchant ships and civilian-owned vessels (see page 110). More than 800 military, merchant and private vessels served under Ramsay across Operation Dynamo.

Once the Operation had been set, Ramsay organised as best he could and undertook vital preparations, such as the issuing of charts to skippers who had never before crossed the

“WHEN THE ADMIRALTY ORDERED THE EVACUATION, THE SITUATION HAD BECOME SO PERILOUS IT WAS ESTIMATED THAT ONLY 45,000 TROOPS WOULD BE RESCUED”



■ *Shoreham-class sloop Bideford was towed back to Dover after its stern was blown off*

Channel. On 27 May, Captain Tennant travelled to Dunkirk aboard the destroyer Wolfhound, to act as Ramsay's eyes and ears on the ground. Tennant assumed the role of senior naval officer on his arrival at 7pm.

THE EVACUATION BEGINS

On the first day, Ramsay committed nine destroyers along with Calcutta and four minesweepers, all of which were ordered to close as near to the beaches as possible before employing their small boats to ferry troops back. These were supplementing the commercial ships already at work, though the Navy vessels soon hit problems.

At low tide, these hulking ships could get no closer than a mile offshore, which meant that the rowing boats had a 20-minute journey to the shore where they could load only 25 men at a time. Embarking a destroyer, which might carry up to 1,000 troops, could take at least six hours. This slow progress saw just 7,669 troops embarked. Aware of the problem, at around 10pm on 27 May, Tennant directed one of the personnel ships to the East Mole, a 487-metre jetty that stretched out into the sea. This would prove a masterstroke; the Mole was to be pivotal to the evacuation process from this point onwards.

The following morning, during the early hours of 28 May, the Royal Navy's efforts were focused around the destroyers Grafton, Greyhound, Impulsive and Wakeful, the latter having jettisoned its six tons of torpedoes and 100 depth charges before leaving Dover in a bid to lighten the load and ensure it could return as many men as possible to England. On arrival at Dunkirk, Wakeful pulled alongside the Mole and embarked 600 men before setting off for home (for its fate – see the box below).

As the morning progressed, the destroyer Mackay reached Dunkirk from the Irish Sea and, like Wakeful, collected 600 men from the Mole in around one hour before giving up its berth to Montrose. The destroyers Worcester and Anthony soon joined it. Also setting sail from Harwich, Dover and the Downs were 19 minesweepers, five of which arrived off Bray Beach by 9.30pm, four off La Panne, and by 9.40pm a further three were hard at work.

In the afternoon, the destroyers Codrington, Jaguar and Javelin arrived, having been diverted from patrol, and yet still the cry went out from the shore for more ships. Seven more – the destroyers Verity, Harvester, Esk, Malcolm, Express, Scimitar and Shikari – arrived the following day, 29 May.

As it transpired, 29 May started badly for the Royal Navy. First, the destroyer Mackay, en route to Bray Beach with Harvester, ran aground, and then fellow destroyer Montrose collided with the tug Sun V in thick fog. Neither Mackay nor Montrose could take any further part in the evacuation. Thankfully, Harvester remained unharmed and picked up 700 troops, including 100 wounded.

By around 1.30pm there were 14 ships laying at Dunkirk, 11 berthed on the East Mole, and the Luftwaffe took note. If the day started badly, it soon got worse; what followed was one of the most devastating air onslaughts of the operation. "Indeed," says the official naval staff history for Operation Dynamo, "it was only by good fortune that the vital Dunkirk harbour channel was not blocked by sinking ships."

The first major air attack commenced at 3.30pm, damaging the French destroyer Mistral on the west quay. The second began around one hour later with Stuka dive-bombers, their banshee sirens wailing as they swooped, spearheading the attack.

THE SKY DARKENS

One 453.5-kilogram bomb and two 226.8-kilogram bombs hit the destroyer Grenade, and within seconds the ship was ablaze, coughing black smoke up into the sky. Elsewhere, the destroyer Jaguar suffered a number of near misses, one of which holed her below the waterline. Her troops were transferred and she limped back to Dover to play no further part.

Among the destroyers, Verity got away under heavy bombardment, though it ran aground, while the fourth air bombardment, beginning at around 6.30pm, struck Saladin, which followed Jaguar back to Dover. Later, the sloop Bideford had its stern blown off, and the gunboat Locust towed it home. Destroyers Gallant, Greyhound and Intrepid also suffered heavy damage.

In spite of the heavy losses on 29 May, the Royal Navy saw 18 destroyers and nine

THE KRIEGSMARINE STRIKES

British shipping at Dunkirk was in danger from the seas as well as the land and sky

Not long after midnight in the small hours of 29 May, the German Kriegsmarine scored its only two successes against British destroyers during the Dunkirk evacuation. The first came from an S-boat, or Schnellboot, which was one of the German navy's fast attack boats and the primary offensive craft employed against shipping in coastal waters. The initial strike came at around 12.45am as S-30 fired a pair of torpedoes at the destroyer Wakeful on its return from Bray Beach with 650 troops on board.

The ship's commander, Fisher, took evasive action, and the first torpedo missed, though the second hit Wakeful's forward boiler room, breaking the ship in two. Each portion sank within 15 seconds, and the troops – asleep below decks – went down with the ship. Just one soldier escaped, along with a handful of crew, including Fisher, who floated clear of the bridge and was picked up by the trawler Comfort.

A number of other trawlers and minesweepers appeared on the scene and initiated rescue procedures, dragging survivors from the sea before the destroyer Grafton arrived at around 2.20am and Commander Robinson took command of the search and rescue effort. Then, just as Comfort pulled alongside Grafton so that Fisher could warn Robinson about the danger of torpedoes in the water, the German submarine U-62 struck, blowing off the destroyer's stern and breaking its back, though it managed to remain on an even keel.

In the confusion, Grafton and the minesweeper Lydd opened fire on Comfort, raking it with machine-gun fire before the latter cut it in two. After the troops escaped onto other ships, the destroyer Ivanhoe sunk Grafton with three shells. Following the Grafton's loss, destroyers were ordered not to stop to assist ships in distress.

■ *Wakeful was the only destroyer lost to S-boat attack during the evacuation*

The Dragonfly-class river gunboat Locust towed Bideford back to Dover during a 32-hour journey

Calcutta was converted to an anti-aircraft cruiser in 1939, and played a key role at Dunkirk

Grenade went down on 29 May to Stuka attack, its magazine exploding after it burned for several hours

minesweepers, as well as a host of non-military vessels and little ships return to England, carrying 47,310 troops. The largest contingent was ferried by Calcutta, which embarked 1,856 men. With heavy casualties among its best ships, however, the Admiralty elected to withdraw the remaining modern destroyers of the H, I and J classes, leaving Ramsay with just 15, many of which were of WWI vintage with limited deck space and meagre anti-aircraft protection.

Thankfully, the Admiralty lifted the destroyer ban the following day, and these vital ships remained committed until the end. By the operation's conclusion, they had lifted 96,000 troops, more than any other type of ship. The minesweepers also proved hardworking vessels – the 36 ships in this class embarking 46,000 – and they did plenty of work on 30 May, sailing close to the beaches and dragging the bedraggled troops aboard.

Still, the Admiralty was wary of the previous day's losses, and ordered that only one destroyer at a time should berth at the East Mole. This cautious approach continued until 6pm, when operations again gained pace. By the end of the day, more than 53,000 men had been embarked, with almost 30,000 coming from the beaches. It was the first day when the lift from the sands exceeded that from the harbour. It was also a day on which the Royal Navy suffered few casualties, with the only destroyers damaged being Anthony (from air attack) and Sabre (from artillery).

HELP ARRIVES

On 31 May, the evacuation was boosted by the arrival of hundreds of small craft from England, as well as additional French and Belgian ships. The only British military vessel lost this day was the minesweeper Devonia, which was beached at La Panne. It was to prove a good day for the Allies, who had elected to lift French troops in equal numbers, and more than 68,000 were embarked, the highest total for the operation.

The morning of 1 June, however, saw renewed Luftwaffe assault, and it wasn't far into the day before the sweeper Skipjack and the destroyer Keith had been hit, the former going down with 275 troops aboard. Not long after, the destroyers Basilisk and Havant went down, while Ivanhoe was hit and towed back to Dover. The elderly Worcester was also damaged by relentless air attack, and the Luftwaffe claimed the minesweeper Brighton Queen. While losses were high – the remaining evacuations would therefore unfold at night – more than 64,000 men were safely landed back in England.

On 2 June, as the operation nudged towards its conclusion, sailing commenced at 5pm. Of the 11 destroyers to head out, Sabre and Shikari arrived first, embarking 1,200 men, before Venomous loaded 1,500. The Navy lost no more of these valuable vessels, and by midnight a further 26,256 troops had been evacuated. The last great effort unfolded on the night of 3 June, culminating in a further 26,175 persons landing in England on 4 June.

Operation Dynamo had run its course. Of the British ships to set sail, 226 had been sunk, 56 of these large vessels; six destroyers were lost and five minesweepers. The lift was a success, but it came at a terrible cost.

ICONIC MOMENT

A number of destroyers filled with British troops evacuated from Dunkirk berthing after they arrive in Dover in May 1940. Per trip, each destroyer could transport up to 900 troops back towards English shores.

D94

THE SHADOW FLEET

HUNDREDS OF COMMERCIAL SHIPS AND SMALLER VESSELS FROM ACROSS THE UK JOINED THE ROYAL NAVY FOR THE DUNKIRK EVACUATION. THEIR CONTRIBUTION WAS CRUCIAL TO ITS SUCCESS

The contribution of these 'little ships' was vital to the success of Operation Dynamo

The call came out over the radio via the BBC. It was broadcast after the nine o'clock news on 14 May 1940, and it declared that the Admiralty had ordered "all owners of self-propelled pleasure craft between 30 and 100 feet" to send their particulars to the Admiralty within 14 days of the broadcast. We do not know who gave the order or who read the bulletin to the nation, but with this far-sighted broadcast came a pivotal moment in the evacuation at Dunkirk. The call for the 'little ships' had been made, and their contribution would prove essential to Britain's war effort.

Its prescience is remarkable. At this stage, Fall Gelb – the German invasion of the West – was just four days old, and though the Dutch army was in ruins, the BEF had yet to fully engage the enemy. No one in the British High Command was yet considering a full-scale retreat to the French seaboard.

The bulletin was heard. The response was remarkable. The Admiralty was flooded with offers; the information requested pouring in from all across the country. The nation now had a 'shadow fleet', as one historian describes it, which could supplement the Royal Navy should the BEF need evacuation from French shores.

Five days after the broadcast, this need became a reality. The BEF was in trouble, and on 19 May, Vice-Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay was tasked with operational planning for a potential evacuation. Ramsay's appointment was sage, as he had knowledge of the waters off Dunkirk, courtesy of his service in World War I. And knowledge was required, for this stretch of water was treacherous in the extreme, the seabed blanketed with wrecks of ships, ancient and modern. The harbour, too, was awkward for navigators, because it had powerful tidal currents and a narrow approach.

To exacerbate Ramsay's problems, from 20 May the Luftwaffe targeted the primary harbour at Dunkirk, creating a blockage that would seriously hamper any Allied vessels. As a result, the primary evacuation points would have to be a jetty to the west of the harbour and – what would become the focus of BEF evacuees, and Luftwaffe dive bombers – the East Mole, a long, concrete and wooden breakwater that stretched out into the sea. Though it was extremely narrow (see page 114), it would become a crucial lifeline for British troops once the evacuation process, now named Operation Dynamo, was underway.

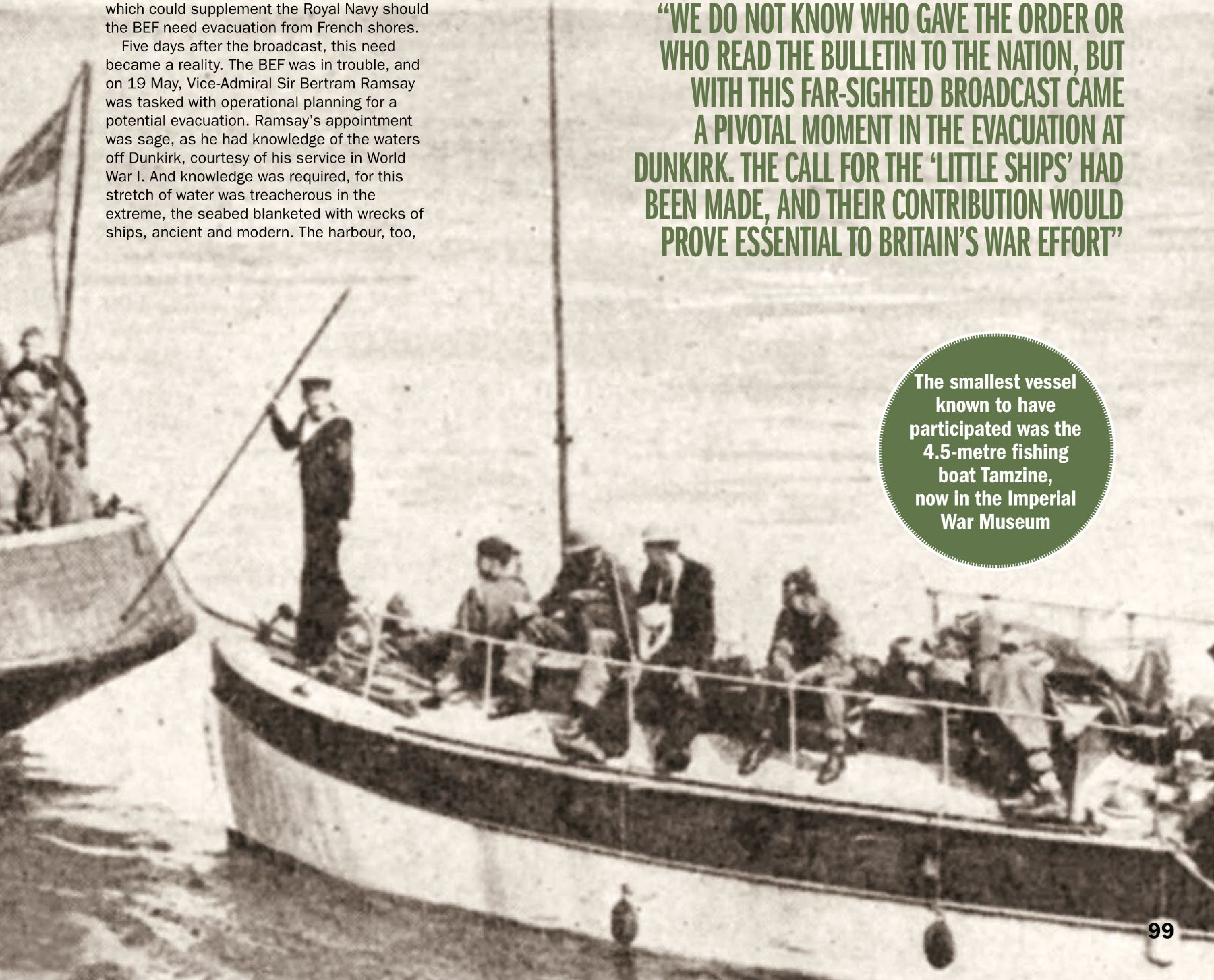
With all these considerations, Ramsay knew that the evacuation would rely heavily on small vessels and boats that could approach the beaches, ferrying evacuees out to the larger ships anchored offshore. Their narrow draft would allow them to navigate the shallow and obstacle-strewn waters.

PERSONNEL SHIPS AND SMALL BOATS

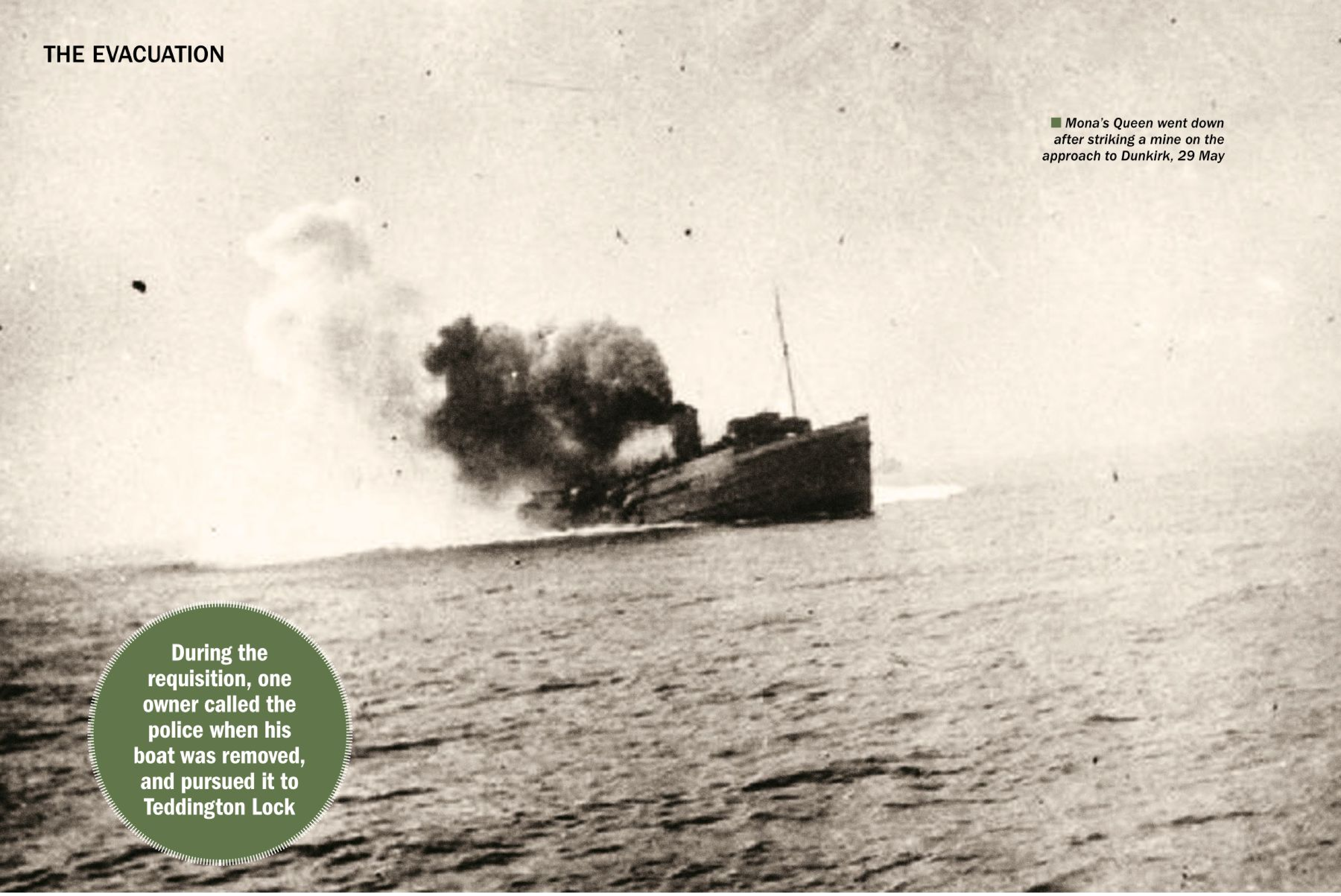
Of course, every ship was key, and it was not just the small vessels that were pressed into service to boost the evacuation. A host of merchant vessels and commercial ships were pressed into service. Prime examples include the two aging Isle of Man passenger ferries, Mona's Isle and King Orry, which were among the first ships to arrive in French waters, the former leaving at daybreak on 27 May, the first full day of Operation Dynamo, with 1,420 soldiers on board. It was hit by the shore guns off Gravelines and attacked by the Luftwaffe on its return – Messerschmitt Bf 109s strafing its deck – injuring 83, including 23 dead. It limped back to Dover, the first ship to complete the round trip. Many more would follow.

The most modern of the 32 personnel ships pressed into service was the Queen of the Channel, the first-ever diesel-powered cross-Channel steamer. It was the first ship outside

"WE DO NOT KNOW WHO GAVE THE ORDER OR WHO READ THE BULLETIN TO THE NATION, BUT WITH THIS FAR-SIGHTED BROADCAST CAME A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN THE EVACUATION AT DUNKIRK. THE CALL FOR THE 'LITTLE SHIPS' HAD BEEN MADE, AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION WOULD PROVE ESSENTIAL TO BRITAIN'S WAR EFFORT"



The smallest vessel known to have participated was the 4.5-metre fishing boat Tamzine, now in the Imperial War Museum



Mona's Queen went down after striking a mine on the approach to Dunkirk, 29 May

During the requisition, one owner called the police when his boat was removed, and pursued it to Teddington Lock

of Royal Navy destroyers to embark troops from the beaches. On the first day, it entered the harbour, collecting around 50 men before it was diverted to the beaches. There, using its own boats, it embarked around 150 men from the beaches before heading back to Dunkirk harbour and boarding a further 700.

These personnel ships, though capable of carrying many men, were the most vulnerable to attack given their size and the fact that many lacked anti-aircraft guns. On 27 May, for example, a whole host of ships – Mona's Queen, Biarritz, Archangel, King Orry, Sequacity, Yewdale and Isle of Thanet – all came under fire from the shore guns at Calais and Gravelines, while the following day Queen of the Channel was struck by the Luftwaffe. Loaded with almost 1,000 troops, it was hit at 4.15am, and by 5am was beneath the waves. Thankfully, the passing Dorrien Rose, which was sailing out to Dunkirk, rescued the survivors.

The Canterbury, meanwhile, made three trips, bringing home 4,416 troops, before it was hit on its final voyage and went into docks for repair. Such was the vulnerability of these ships that on 28 May, the Admiralty decided that unarmed personnel vessels would only operate at night.

Back in London on 27 May, the Admiralty called up the list of responders to the BBC small vessels bulletin, although bureaucracy and red tape seems to have hindered their dispatch from the various assembly points. A London doctor who offered up his motor yacht, Constant Nymph, recorded how he was refused entry to the Thames, his route to the assembly point at Sheerness, because he did not have the necessary permit.

"THIS DREADFUL DAY OF LOSSES ALSO SAW THE LARGEST SHIP EMPLOYED IN OPERATION DYNAMO SENT TO THE SEABED"

By the time the director of the small vessels pool, Vice-Admiral Sir Lionel Preston, had fully surveyed the list of available craft, it had become apparent that many of the boats registered were too small for operational purpose. Preston, therefore, dispatched officers to a string of different boat yards, obtaining 40 motorboats and launches all of which had drafts of between one to two metres, ensuring their suitability for beaching.

Few of these little ships reached Dunkirk before 29 May, but they were the first major contributors to the fleet of hundreds of small craft that would play such an important role in the embarkation from the beaches of almost 100,000 troops, ferrying them from the sands to the larger ships offshore.

HELL FROM ABOVE

The story of 29 May is largely one of ships sunk or damaged, says the official naval staff history for Operation Dynamo: "Our losses were very heavy and began very early." There were several notable casualties among the personnel ships, including Mona's Queen, which struck a magnetic mine around 5.30am as it ferried water to the troops. It went down in just two minutes, though the captain and crew were saved.

Also going down was the Fenella, which was hit with 650 troops on board, one bomb splintering the promenade deck, while a second struck the Mole and sent a block of concrete spinning into the hull, piercing it below the waterline. A third wrecked the engine room. The Fenella was abandoned as it sank.

Another personnel ship to suffer on a day of heavy Luftwaffe attack was King Orry, a bomb smashing its steering gear and sending it swinging out of control. It steamed into the mole, tearing a gap in it and temporarily putting it out of action.

A number of trawlers, requisitioned by the Admiralty, berthed alongside the Mole, and the Calvi and the Polly Johnson received direct hits. A bomb fell into the former's ventilation shaft, exploding deep inside and sending the crew scrambling onto the deck of the nearby trawler, John Cattling. Calvi sank immediately, though it went down upright, and onlookers saw its ensign emerging from the shallow waters, fluttering in the wind. The Polly Johnson survived the attack but began taking on water

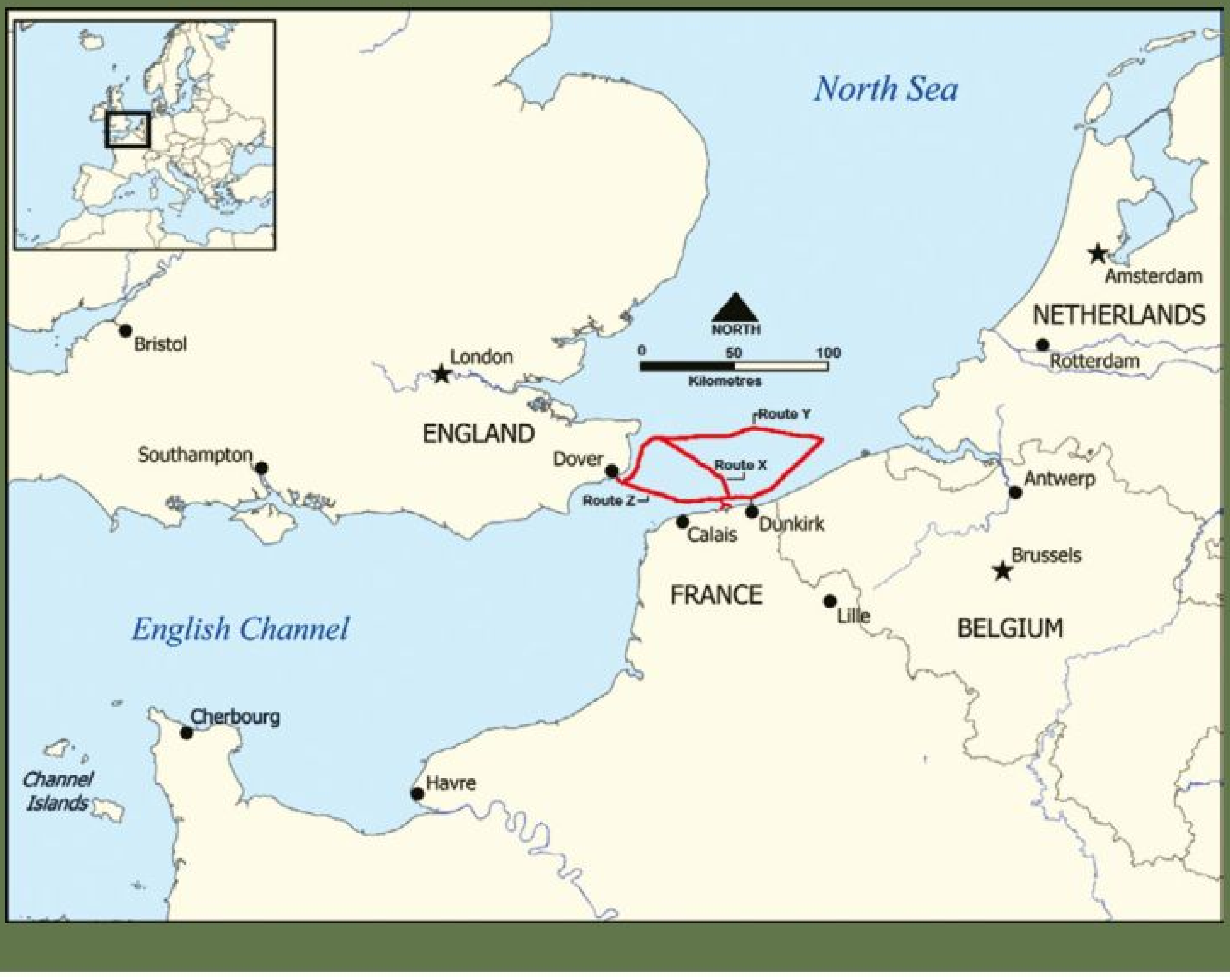
THE X, Y AND Z ROUTES TO DUNKIRK

Plotting the safest route between Dover and Dunkirk was no easy task

The most direct route between Dover and Dunkirk had been heavily protected from enemy shipping when the Admiralty ordered the laying of 5,000 mines in 33 large fields. Hence the most direct viable route (later designated Route Z) headed south of these fields, keeping close to the French coast between Calais and Dunkirk. However, once German artillery took up positions along the north French seaboard, this 64-kilometre route became incredibly dangerous, and it was decided that it was simply too impractical for daylight sailing.

As a consequence, the Admiralty selected a route heading far north and then east of the minefields, travelling via the Dyck Whistle bouy, Middelkerke buoy and the Zuydcoote Pass. This route (designated Route Y) greatly increased the journey time, however, more than doubling the distance to 140 kilometres. The longer period at sea exposed shipping to German naval and air attack, though the route avoided the troublesome shore batteries. On 27 May, Ramsay dispatched several vessels along this route.

While they set sail, a third route was plotted (designated Route X) from the North Goodwin to the north end of Ruytingen Bank and onto the heavily mined Ruytingen Pass. This was seen as the ideal compromise, as the journey was just over 88 kilometres. Ramsay dispatched the minesweepers Skipjack and Halcyon to clear the route, while the destroyer Impulse and the lighthouse vessel Patricia laid buoys to mark the route.



"THE LONGER PERIOD AT SEA EXPOSED SHIPPING TO GERMAN NAVAL AND AIR ATTACK"

■ *The Admiralty debated which of these three routes exposed Allied shipping to the least danger*

and was abandoned. The armed trawler Arley embarked the crew and sunk it with gunfire.

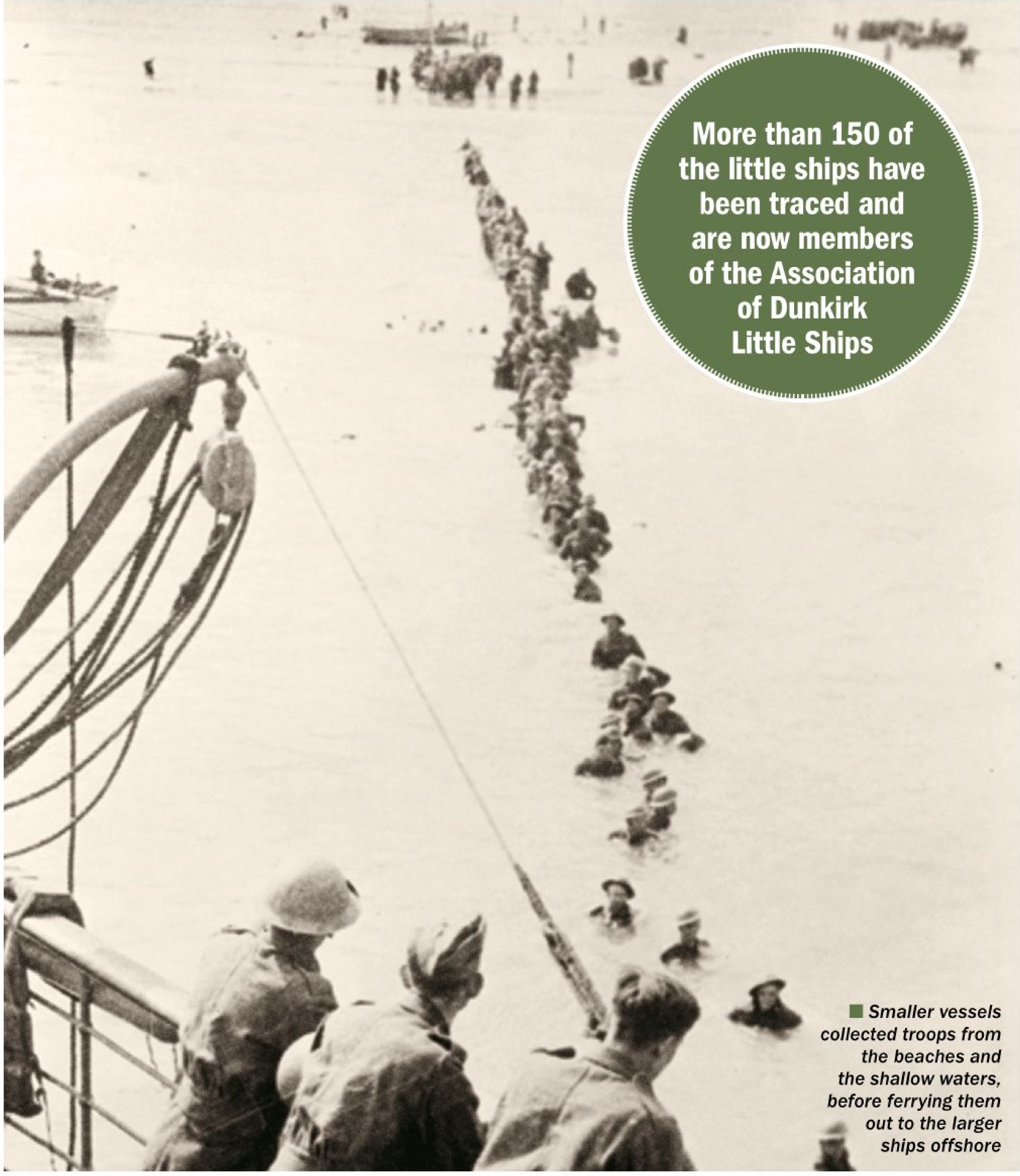
This dreadful day of losses also saw the largest ship employed in Operation Dynamo sent to the seabed. Clan MacAlister, a 6,600-ton Glasgow freighter, had hoisted out six motor landing craft earlier that day. Once bombed, it began sinking immediately, and the crew and rescued troops transferred to the destroyer Malcolm and the minesweeper Pangbourne. Clan MacAlister settled on the bottom on an even keel with its upper works exposed above the waterline. It remained on fire for several days, and the naval staff histories note that it remained a target for enemy bombers who thought it was afloat and in full working order. Even in death it continued to serve its country.

Also settling on an even keel when hitting the seabed was the Southern Railway ship Normannia, which was struck by Heinkel bombers, as was its sister ship, Lorina, which was hit just minutes later. The old Thames paddle steamer Crested Eagle was another casualty, hit by four bombs when packed with troops, including those rescued from Fenella. The 200 survivors seen in the water were heavily strafed by Luftwaffe machine-gun fire.

As the sun set on 29 May, the scene at Dunkirk was one of utter carnage. Burning ships littered the waters, sending thick palls of smoke spiralling into the night sky. Yet, for all the destruction, close to 50,000 men were evacuated that day, with more than 33,000 being lifted off the Eastern Mole.

THE ARMADA GROWS

As more and more exhausted troops flooded into Dunkirk, tempers flared and discipline sometimes failed. Many small boats capsized when they were swamped with desperate soldiers. Officers who retained their composure



More than 150 of the little ships have been traced and are now members of the Association of Dunkirk Little Ships

■ *Smaller vessels collected troops from the beaches and the shallow waters, before ferrying them out to the larger ships offshore*

THE EAST MOLE

This narrow pier played an essential role in the rescue of troops from Dunkirk

It was on 28 May that Captain Tennant, aware that the main harbour's dock basins had been blocked by air attack, realised that the best embarkation point for British troops was the east pier or jetty, known as the East Mole, which lay outside the perimeter of Dunkirk harbour. It was not built for use by shipping. In fact, it was little more than a latticework concrete breakwater, overlaid with a wooden walkway.

Even though it was little more than 1.5-metres wide, the East Mole was 488-metres long and stretched out into deeper water, which meant that up to 16 vessels could dock beside it and embark troops. The personnel ship Queen of the Channel was the first vessel to pull alongside and rescue waiting troops.

Though unprotected, the East Mole survived constant harassment and bombardment from the Luftwaffe and German artillery, and the vast majority of BEF escapees embarked from its narrow shoulders.

The remains of the East Mole outside Dunkirk harbour today

Alongside British and French ships, vessels from Belgium, Poland, Holland and Norway all assisted in Operation Dynamo

complained bitterly at the lack of ships, although investigations into ship reports showed that every one was working to its utmost capacity.

The active campaign to continually build up the number of available ships carried on back in Britain, and an additional 31 craft reached Dunkirk on 30 May, with many small boats coming from Sheerness, Portsmouth and Newhaven. A clutch of tugs made their way across from Tilbury pulling 23 motorboats and 46 rowing boats, all of which would go on to prove themselves essential to the evacuation from the beaches, while five more tugs sailed from Gravesend towing barges. The motorboats, in particular, were crucial because they were able to retrieve abandoned and drifting boats, thereby helping to increase the rate of evacuation.

The naval staff history for Operation Dynamo recalls the array of non-military vessels crossing the Channel this day, citing an impressive list of yachts, drifters and trawlers, launches and steam hopper barges, car ferries, coasters and cockle boats, train ferries, speed boats, picket boats, seaplane tenders, pleasure craft, steam pinnaces, and even a Thames fire float, "a host of vessels" heading "in ever-increasing numbers for Dover, the Downs or Dunkirk direct, while the cry 'more ships, more boats' still went up off the French coast." By the day's end, almost 54,000 men had been successfully lifted from the beaches and the Mole.

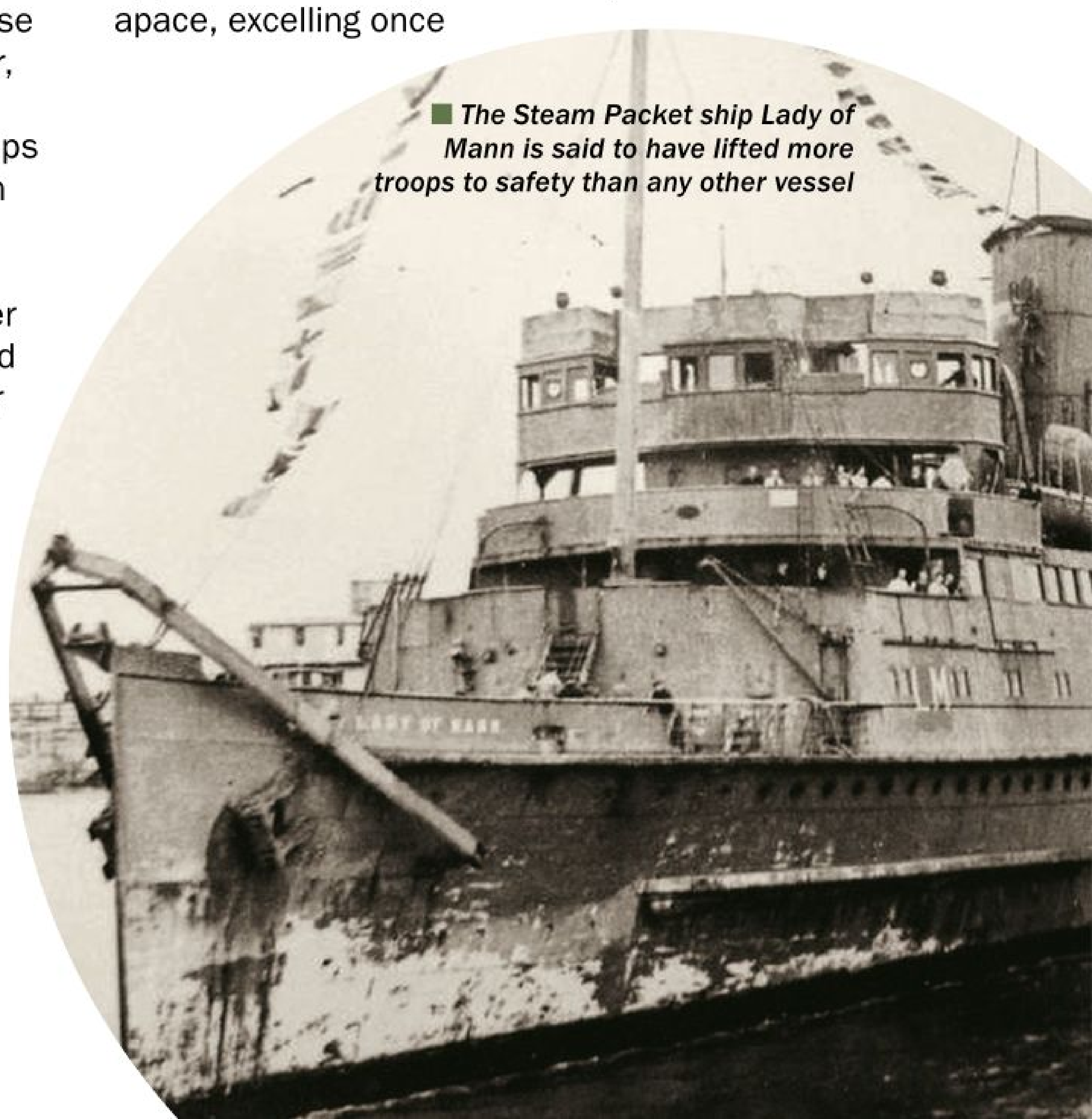
"AS DAWN BROKE ON 31 MAY, THERE WAS A NASTY SWELL, AND THE SEA SWALLOWED AND DROWNED MANY TROOPS WHO RUSHED OUT TO THE SMALL BOATS"

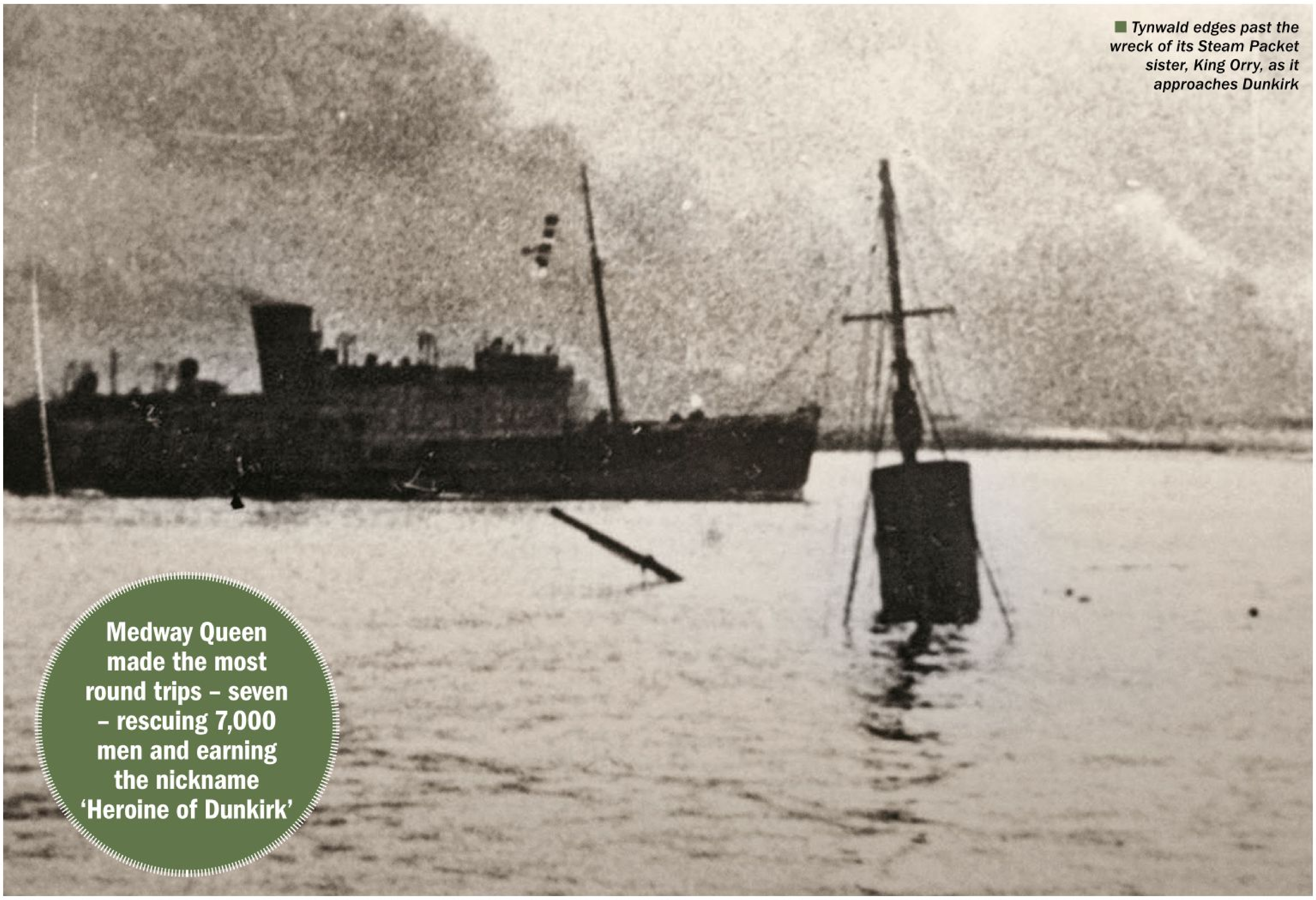
As dawn broke on 31 May, there was a nasty swell, and the sea swallowed and drowned many troops who rushed out to the small boats. A great number of the boats, too, were swamped. By the end of the day, however, hundreds of small craft had arrived. Admiral Ramsay singled out for special praise six Thames Estuary cockleboats – Defender, Endeavour, Letitia, Reliance, Renown and Resolute – which ferried troops to larger ships offshore, and brought 180 officers and men back to Ramsgate.

He described their crews as "exemplary" volunteers who had never before been under gunfire or the rigours of Naval discipline, and yet who maintained perfect formation under shellfire and aircraft attack. Sadly, Renown struck a mine on its return to England, and its skipper and crew were killed. Elsewhere, at least 16 motorboats were lost, many by misadventure, whether engine failure, grounding, swamping or the like. And yet still the small boats continued to come.

Not every small-boat skipper proved to be as brave as those commanding the Thames cockleboats, though, and at one stage Ramsay ordered the captain of a Royal Navy minesweeper to "arrest any little ship returning empty."

As the Germans increased their artillery barrage on Dunkirk, La Panne beach and the approach channels, the recovery continued apace, excelling once


The Steam Packet ship Lady of Mann is said to have lifted more troops to safety than any other vessel



Tynwald edges past the wreck of its Steam Packet sister, King Orry, as it approaches Dunkirk

Medway Queen made the most round trips – seven – rescuing 7,000 men and earning the nickname 'Heroine of Dunkirk'

the choppy seas of the forenoon had calmed. Indeed, 31 May proved an important moment for the Allies, with more than 68,000 men lifted to safety, making it the most successful day of the entire operation.

LUFTWAFFE RENEWS ASSAULT

During the early morning of 1 June, a number of personnel ships got away with heavy loads. Whippingham, an Isle of Wight passenger ferry, took on almost 3,000 soldiers. It was so overladen that when straddled by shellfire, troops rushed over to the port side causing it to list 20 degrees. Luckily, the seas were calm and it remained afloat. Lady of Mann also got away during the night with many wounded aboard, while the personnel ship Maid of Orleans acted as a jetty to embark troops onto destroyers before pushing off from the Mole with almost 2,000 men on board.

The Luftwaffe kept up relentless attacks all through the night, and when the day finally dawned bright and clear, the German bombers attacked with renewed intent. Alongside several warships, the 3,500-ton personnel vessel Scotia went down. Most of its contingent of 2,000 French troops was rescued but the crew was killed. Another personnel ship, Prague, was severely damaged. To save it from sinking, it was towed home and beached off Sandown Castle. During its three trips across the Channel, it had evacuated more than 6,000 men.

It was another dreadful day for the Allied fleet with 31 vessels – both military and private – sunk and 11 damaged, though in excess of 64,000 French and British troops had been saved. Those few hours of bombing on 1 June had claimed more shipping than the previous seven days combined. As a consequence of this, the Admiralty elected to suspend daylight evacuation. The personnel ships, in particular, had suffered terribly, with eight sunk and four disabled thus far. Embarkation continued through the night, however, and a total of 26,256 men were landed in England on 2 June. The operation was drawing to a close.

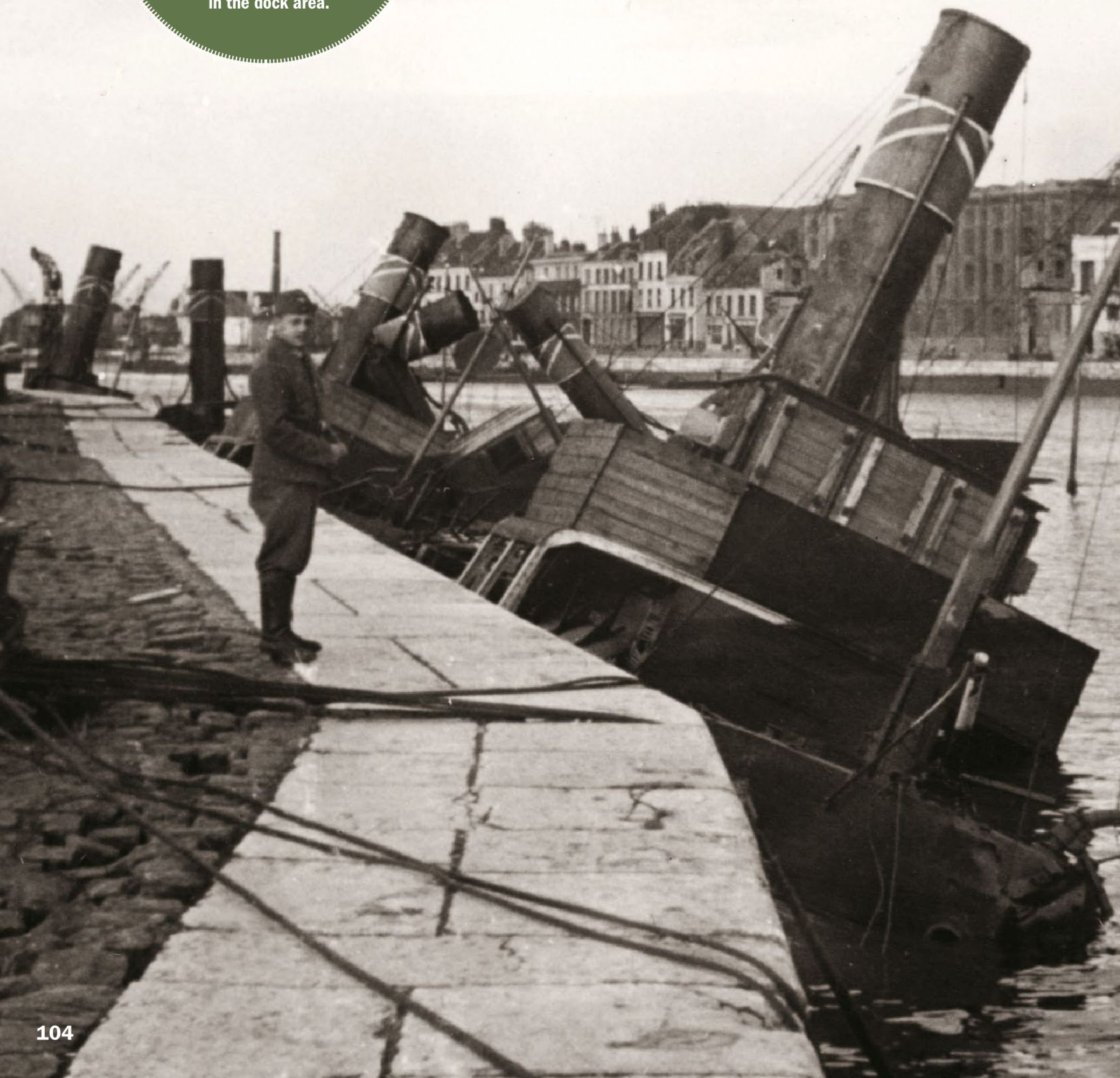
One of the final sailings got underway on the night of 2-3 June, and again the personnel vessels proved invaluable, with King George V and St Helier embarking almost 3,500 men between them from the East Mole. This rescue completed the evacuation of the British rearguard, and at 11.30pm one Captain Tennant, Ramsay's representative at Dunkirk, sent the welcome signal: "BEF evacuated."

Thousands of French troops still remained ashore, though, and their contribution is not to be overlooked – their brave defence of the Dunkirk perimeter permitted the evacuation of so many British troops. Confusion reigned when the French, who were expected to follow the BEF rearguard onto the Mole, congregated on the West Quay instead. The personnel ship Royal Sovereign demonstrated tremendous skill in getting across to them, and boarded 1,500 troops. It ran aground at one point, a sitting duck for the Luftwaffe and artillery attack, but it managed to survive unscathed and caught the next tide.

Elsewhere, the personnel ships Cote d'Argent, Rouen, Newhaven and Tynwald also collected hundreds of French troops, though the Lady of Mann was ordered back "for lack of troops" and carried only 18 Frenchmen, embarked from a small boat. Few ships were lost this night.

During the night following, 3 June, more than 45,000 French troops were rescued (along with six British stragglers), and by the afternoon of 4 June, Operation Dynamo was complete. By the time the last survivors unloaded in England, 224,686 men of the BEF had been safely returned from France, along with 141,445 Allied soldiers, making a grand total of more than 366,000 men. Dunkirk was no victory, but the rescue operation was undoubtedly a huge success, with the shadow fleet and the 'little ships' proving pivotal to the outcome. Their place in history was assured.

> **"THEIR BRAVE DEFENCE OF THE DUNKIRK PERIMETER PERMITTED THE EVACUATION OF SO MANY BRITISH TROOPS"**



ICONIC MOMENT

Photographed after the capture of Dunkirk by the Germans, the port city's docks had been wrecked by the battle. More than 40,000 vehicles were left behind by Allied troops, some even sunk in the dock area.

THE ROLE OF THE RAF

THE DUNKIRK EVACUATION SAW THE RAF EMBARK ON A STEEP LEARNING CURVE AS IT STRUGGLED AGAINST THE LUFTWAFFE'S SUPERIOR NUMBERS

The 1938 Rearmament Programme had called for an expanded RAF that would be capable of defending Britain from Luftwaffe attack, while also carrying out bomber raids against Germany. The RAF did not envisage itself providing support for troops on the ground, though it did agree to the transfer of aircraft overseas – the British Air Forces in France comprising two formations, the Air Component as part of the BEF, and the Advanced Air Striking Force, which was also to protect French units.

The fighting in France did not go well for the RAF, however, with Fighter Command expending 386 Hurricanes during a one-sided conflict that saw 74 pilots captured or killed. By the time reconnaissance Hurricanes from the Air Component reported German panzer divisions crossing the Canal du Nord on 20 May, plans were already in motion to withdraw the remainder of the Air Component to the UK.

The RAF sprang into action on 20 May, with two squadrons of bombers with fighter escorts dispatched to attack the German columns on the Canal du Nord. Unfortunately, by the time they arrived, the panzer divisions had moved rapidly into open ground between Arras and the Somme. They were widely dispersed, and the RAF's bombs had next to no effect. "On the critical day when the Germans were in full cry," writes Major General Julian Thompson, "the air force took no effective part in the fighting."

A day later, as the BEF retreated towards the Channel and the remainder of the Air Component flew home, it was decided that Fighter Command's 11 Group and Bomber Command's 2 Group would provide air cover for the BEF's retreat in the north of France, flying umbrella operations from the south of England.

At this stage, it is said that 11 Group had 266 frontline fighter planes: 114 Spitfires, 15 Defiants, and 137 Hurricanes in 21 different squadrons. With five squadrons of Spitfires earmarked purely for home defence, the evacuees at Dunkirk would

The Supermarine Spitfire gave the RAF a fighter to counter the lethal Messerschmitt Bf 109

receive air cover from around 200 fighters in 16 squadrons, along with 2 Group's six squadrons of Bristol Blenheim IV bombers, which totalled around 60 planes. In addition, the RAF also deployed a clutch of slow Avro Ansons and a number of Lockheed Hudsons from Coastal Command's 16 Group.

Because the RAF had no effective aircraft for the close support of ground troops, the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm sought to fill the void with Fairey Swordfish torpedo biplanes, as well as a handful of Blackburn B-24 Skuas, which combined the functions of dive bomber and fighter.

THE AIR ASSAULT BEGINS

The Luftwaffe opened their air assault against British forces at Dunkirk on 25 May. At this point, the Luftwaffe believed they could bomb the BEF into submission, as they had with the Polish forces that were cornered in the Iłza and Bzura pockets during the previous year.

The first full day of the coordinated British evacuation, Operation Dynamo, began on 27 May. On the same day, the Luftwaffe completed its destruction of Dunkirk as an operating seaport with 225 bomber and 75 Stuka (dive bomber) sorties unloading more than 350 tons of bombs. The RAF tried to counter this devastation with 287 sorties, and managed to shoot down seven Dornier (Do) 17s, six Heinkel (He) 111s and two Junkers (Ju) 88s. They paid a heavy price. More than 500 Messerschmitt Bf 109s took to the skies and Fighter Command lost 14 Hurricanes and five Spitfires on this day alone.

The following day, the Luftwaffe flew a further 75 bombing sorties against Dunkirk, and again the RAF countered. On the previous day, the RAF had flown in single-squadron patrols and were almost always outnumbered. This time they bid to address the problem by flying in larger formations, though they halved the number of missions. Fighter Command struggled again, taking down only one Do 17 and two Bf 109s for the cost of eight Hurricanes, three Defiants and three Spitfires. The Luftwaffe's superior numbers were taking their toll.

On 29 May, the RAF increased its efforts further, flying patrols of two squadrons instead of one. This allowed Fighter Command to attack in greater numbers, but it led to lengthier gaps in the frequency of patrols, leaving the evacuees with no air cover. There were at least six hours of daylight spread across the day where the evacuees saw no British fighters above the beaches of Dunkirk.

Taking advantage of these longer breaks between the RAF patrols, the Luftwaffe flew 175 bombing sorties on 29 May. They lost four He 111s, four Ju 88s and six Bf 109s from among the escorts but the German fighters took down seven Hurricanes and seven Spitfires. More crucially, the Germans

> “FIGHTER COMMAND STRUGGLED AGAIN, TAKING DOWN ONLY ONE DO 17 AND TWO BF 109S FOR THE COST OF EIGHT HURRICANES, THREE DEFIANTS AND THREE SPITFIRES. THE LUFTWAFFE'S SUPERIOR NUMBERS WERE TAKING THEIR TOLL”

sank 12 ships, including two key destroyers and four large passenger vessels. The Stuka dive bombers proved especially effective.

Elsewhere on 29 May, Coastal Command patrolled the sea lanes scouting for S-boats, and lost three Avro Ansons, while the Fleet Air Arm dispatched ten Fairey Swordfish to attack German artillery, but unfortunately lost half of these to a group of Bf 109s. Undoubtedly, after a day of devastating attacks, the Luftwaffe had emerged as the master of the skies above Dunkirk.

The day following, 30 May, was finally one of relief for the BEF and the beleaguered RAF. The day broke with heavy fog and low overcast skies, thereby scuppering any concerted forays from the Luftwaffe's heavy bombers. Fighter Command flew 257 sorties in nine missions, but only encountered a smattering of enemy aircraft, shooting down a pair of Do 17s. On the ground, the massed German forces failed to press home their significant advantage, making this the best day for the British thus far.

OPERATION DYNAMO GAINS PACE

On 31 May, the Germans resolve on the ground strengthened with the appointment of a single overall commander, and they launched a series of coordinated assaults on the Dunkirk perimeter, the east flank coming under especially heavy bombardment. Indeed, the Germans might have enjoyed greater success were it not for a rare instance

The Bristol Blenheim Mk IV was the best of the RAF's medium-range bombers

Air Marshal Barratt, commander of the British Air Forces in France, and Air Vice-Marshal Playfair, commander of AASF

THE RAF IN FRANCE IN 1940

The British Air Forces in France suffered heavily in the face of the German advance

Prior to Operation Dynamo and the sky battles over Dunkirk, the RAF had two independent units operating in France: the Air Component portion of the BEF, and the Advanced Air Striking Force (AASF), which was ordered to protect French units as well as British. Both formations operated under the banner of the British Air Forces in France, which was set up on 15 January, and they fell under the command of Air Marshal Arthur Barratt.

The AASF initially comprised two Bristol Blenheim bomber squadrons and eight Fairey Battle squadrons, with two Hurricane fighter squadrons providing bomber escort. The fighter component was doubled once Hitler invaded. The RAF had hoped that the AASF bombers would hinder the German advance, though it soon became apparent that the Fairey Battles, which were relatively slow and under-gunned, were highly vulnerable to Messerschmitt Bf 109s.

The BEF's Air Component, meanwhile, consisted of four Lysander reconnaissance squadrons, four Blenheim squadrons, and four Hurricane fighter squadrons. As with the AASF, two additional Hurricane squadrons joined the fray once the Germans invaded France. The Hurricane would suffer greatly during their RAF's stint in France.

The RAF had sent Blenheims and Battles to France, as they were medium bombers and deemed better suited to operations where enemy fighters might be in operation. Bomber Command's 16 squadrons of UK-based heavy aircraft – such as Wellingtons, Hampdens and Whitleys – were far too slow for daytime operations, and were to be employed as part of Britain's strategic strike force that would fly under the cover of darkness against heavy industrial targets, such as those in the German Ruhr region.

The AASF engaged German forces on the first day that Germany launched its assault on the West on 10 May. Air Marshall Barratt was frustrated by French inactivity in the face of the German assault, and scrambled his bombers. The outcome was costly and set the tone for RAF operations against the advancing Germans in France; 32 sorties were made that day, and every aircraft suffered damage, with 13 failing to return at all.

> **"THE RAF HAD HOPED THAT THE AASF BOMBERS WOULD HINDER THE GERMAN ADVANCE, THOUGH IT SOON BECAME APPARENT THAT THE FAIREY BATTLES, WHICH WERE RELATIVELY SLOW AND UNDER-GUNNED, WERE HIGHLY VULNERABLE TO MESSERSCHMITT BF 109S"**

during the campaign where the RAF provided air support for Allied ground troops.

This occurred a little after 4pm when ten Fairey Albacores, biplane bombers from the Fleet Air Arm, hit targets at Westende. A follow-up mission flew four hours later at 8pm with nine Skuas bombing German pontoon bridges on the Nieuport Canal. In addition, Bomber Command sent 93 Blenheims into the sky in a bid to forestall the German advance. During these raids on 31 May, escort Hurricanes engaged enemy Bf 109s and accounted for three kills with only one loss.

British success was not uniform, however. As the day progressed, the Luftwaffe attacked in three waves, sending up 195 bomber sorties with 260 Bf 109 escorts, which were met by 289 RAF fighters flying in large formations, comprising several squadrons. British fighters accounted for only six bombers and four fighters, while they lost almost 20 planes, including six Spitfires and eight Hurricanes. Though the RAF suffered greatly, it was a good day for the BEF with more than 50,000 troops evacuated.

A good day for the BEF meant a bad day for Germany, and the Luftwaffe were urged by Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring to redouble their efforts in a bid to finally destroy the BEF. The Luftwaffe responded on 1 June with the most ferocious wave of assaults to date, sending up 160 bomber sorties and more than 300 Stuka raids. A vast array of Bf 109 and Bf110 escorts flew alongside them, totalling more than 500 fighters.

When the RAF responded with 267 fighter sorties of their own – flying eight patrols of three or four squadrons – they made little impression, shooting down just two bombers and a pair of Stukas. Fighter Command did count ten kills among the Messerschmitts but at a cost of 16 Spitfires and Hurricanes. The Luftwaffe bombers then claimed a number of casualties among Allied shipping, sinking eight vessels, including three destroyers, and damaging a further ten ships before the clouds closed in to protect the fleets from further air attack.

With the Allies' perimeter under increasing pressure and now mostly held by French troops, the German shore batteries covered all routes into Dunkirk, and had both the beaches and the evacuation waters in range. In a bid to protect the evacuees from artillery bombardment, the RAF launched 24 Blenheims on the morning of 2 June with orders to neutralise the German guns. Three of these bombers fell foul of German anti-aircraft flak.

The Luftwaffe also scrambled its forces, and around 120 German planes – He111s and Stukas, with their escorts of Bf 109s and Bfs 110s – took to the skies. Another ferocious dogfight ensued, and again the German fighters prevailed, with six RAF fighters downed for the loss of just one Messerschmitt.

By the time Operation Dynamo came to close on 4 June, the RAF had accounted for 42 bombers and 36 fighters in the skies above Dunkirk, according to Luftwaffe records. Several more bombers had fallen to the Navy's anti-aircraft fire. The RAF losses were even heavier, with 11 Group losing 84 fighters alone. Fighter Command resources were reduced to 367 Hurricanes and Spitfires. Every one would soon be required in the Battle of Britain.

The RAF's Boulton Paul Defiant fighter was designed to take down enemy bombers

Fairey biplane aircraft, such as the Albacore, were pressed into service as RAF resources ran low

The Hawker Hurricane played a prominent role in dogfights above Dunkirk

2762
BURMA

ICONIC MOMENT

RAF pilot and squadron leader Robert Stanford Tuck led fighters over Dunkirk. Photographed in the cockpit of his Hawker Hurricane, he was shot down and captured while fighting in the skies over France in 1942.

THE WEAPONS OF DUNKIRK

FROM HURRICANE VERSUS MESSERSCHMITT TO 25-POUNDER VERSUS PANZER III, WE ANALYSE SOME OF THE KEY WEAPONRY EMPLOYED DURING THE GERMAN ASSAULT ON DUNKIRK

The Stuka dive bomber with its 698kg bomb load played a pivotal role in the German attack on France

The German divisions that assembled in late May 1940 at the canal line south of Dunkirk were equipped to fight a true 'all-arms' battle, combining infantry, tanks, artillery and air assaults. Their armour and mechanised infantry were coordinated in panzer formations with tanks assembled en masse. The German general, Heinz Guderian, had learned that the most effective blitzkrieg machine was the fast-moving strike tank, which could punch through enemy lines and move at speed. It was these machines that were mobilised against the French, who favoured slower, heavily armoured infantry support tanks.

Guderian was an avid reader of the writings of Liddell Hart, the great British military commentator who had done so much to espouse the efficacy of mechanised warfare. The Germans, however, had been slow to develop their own armour. The Treaty of Versailles, signed in 1919 in the aftermath of WWI, had forbidden the Germans from employing tanks in the military. Hence, as Germany prepared for its bludgeoning assault on France in 1940, it had around 2,500 available tanks, though just shy of 1,500 of these were the weak and somewhat inferior Panzer I and Panzer II models.

The armour on the Panzer I was only 13mm thick, and it was equipped with just two machine guns. The Panzer II's armour was more than twice as thick, at 30mm, and one of its machine guns had been replaced with a 20mm cannon, but both models were outdated and markedly inferior to the best French tanks.

The most effective German armour came in the form of its 349 Panzer III and 278 Panzer IV models, along with around 330 Czech tanks that had been absorbed into the panzer regiments. The Panzer III and the two Czech models – designated Panzer 35(t) and 38(t) – had 37mm cannon, while the Panzer III and 38(t) had armour that was 30mm thick. The Panzer IV, with its 50mm armour and short-barrelled 75mm cannon, was intended as a close support tank for the Panzer III.

ALLIED TANKS AND ARTILLERY

The German armour was, on the whole, much faster than the French – the Panzer II could reach a top speed of around 40 kilometres an hour – but the French tanks boasted heavier protection, bigger guns and superior numbers. The French could put around 4,000 armoured fighting vehicles in the field, with serviceable tanks making up around half this number.

The feathers in the French cap were the S35 and the Char B1. The former, known as the

> "THE GERMAN ARMOUR WAS, ON THE WHOLE, MUCH FASTER THAN THE FRENCH – THE PANZER II COULD REACH 40KM/H – BUT THE FRENCH TANKS BOASTED HEAVIER PROTECTION, BIGGER GUNS AND SUPERIOR NUMBERS"

SOMUA, is widely regarded among the best tanks in the world at the time, with its 40mm armour and its hefty 47mm turret-mounted cannon, while the Char was even more heavily armoured (60mm) and armed (a 75mm on the chassis and a 47mm on the turret), though it was very slow.

The French, like the Germans, combined motorised infantry with massed armour, and also employed Hotchkiss tanks in these mobile divisions – the 35 wrapped in 34mm armour and the 39 boasting a 40mm skin. Both Hotchkiss tanks had 37mm guns. The only French tank that could move at speed was the excellent SOMUA, which could reach 40 kilometres per hour.

The British, meanwhile, employed three different types of tank, which were fielded in accordance to the teachings of Liddell Hart – light tanks for reconnaissance; Cruiser tanks, grouped together, which were mobile but weak in firepower; and heftily armoured though snail-paced heavy tanks for infantry support.

The first of these were the Light Tank Mk VIs, which could hit speeds of 56 kilometres per hour but were lightly armoured (14mm) and armed with just .303in and .55in machine guns. The Cruiser Mk IV had 30mm armour and hit speeds of 48 kilometres per hour. It carried a 2-pounder gun and .303in machine gun. Of the two heavy infantry tanks, the Matilda Mark I only carried a .303in machine gun, though it was heavily armoured with a 60mm skin. The Matilda Mark II boasted 78mm armour and, like the Cruiser, carried a 2-pounder gun and .303in machine gun.

Unfortunately for the British, the tanks were inadequately armed. The 2-pounder gun was too small to fire an effective high explosive round, dispatching only hard shot, which was completely ineffective against infantry and bunkers. The paucity of its tank performance during the BEF's time in France saw more than 600 British tanks destroyed or abandoned.

"WHILE ARTILLERY PROVED EFFECTIVE AGAINST EVEN THE HARDIEST TANKS, PERHAPS EVEN MORE DEVASTATING FOR GROUND ARMOUR WAS ATTACK FROM ABOVE"

The enemy of the tank was heavy artillery. Only the likes of the Matildas and the French Char B1 could deflect the shells from the German 37mm Pak 36, the main anti-tank weapon of the Wehrmacht infantry units. Among the British field artillery units were French 25mm Hotchkiss anti-tank guns, along with 2-pounders and 18-pounders, all of which could damage German tanks; if the armour were too strong, gunners would aim for the tracks or the weaker side plates.

The British also fielded the 25-pounder, which featured an anti-tank site, while the French had the 75mm, perhaps the first modern artillery piece, first introduced in the late 19th century. The most iconic piece of German artillery was the 88mm anti-aircraft gun, which could also wreak havoc against tanks.

THE LUFTWAFFE

While artillery proved effective against even the hardiest tanks, perhaps even more devastating for ground armour was attack from above. One key to Germany's speedy success in both Poland and France lay in its domination of the skies. And one of its most famous weapons was the Junkers (Ju) 87 dive-bomber, more commonly known as the Stuka.

This piece of flying artillery ranged ahead of German panzer divisions and destroyed Allied aircraft on the ground, before they became airborne. The Stuka, which could hit speeds of 340 kilometres an hour, built up a fearsome reputation, and is synonymous with the attacks on the BEF at Dunkirk. Its failure to destroy the BEF, however, tarnished its reputation, and it suffered heavy losses in the Battle of Britain.

The Luftwaffe's crucial fighter plane was the Messerschmitt Bf 109, which saw action during the Spanish Civil War before taking to the skies over France. It was produced in a number of different variations, and the Bf 109 E-3, with two MG 17s above the engine and one MG FF cannon in each wing, could hit almost 563 kilometres an hour at 14.5 kilometres.

While the Me 109 was a single-man plane, the Messerschmitt Bf 110 was a twin-engine heavy fighter and fighter bomber, with a rear-gunner as well as a pilot. These too operated in the skies above Dunkirk. The primary bombers used to target British troops and shipping, however, were the Heinkel (He) 111, a medium bomber famed for its glass nose; the Dornier (Do) 17, a light bomber sometimes called the flying pencil; the Junkers (Ju) 452 and the Ju 88.

Flying out of recently conquered Holland, the Ju 88As were capable of dive-bombing, like the infamous Stukas, and they had already targeted several Royal Navy ships during the Norway campaigns. They would account for many more during the Dunkirk operation.

The heavily armoured French Char B1 boasted a 75mm cannon on the chassis and a 47mm on the turret

BATTLE OF CASSEL

The day when British guns held off German armour in this strategically vital location

The BEF made several valiant rear-guard stands as it set about withdrawing to the beaches of Dunkirk. The battle for the medieval walled town of Cassel was one such action, where British artillery held off German armour, for a time at least.

The town was strategically placed on the junction of five major roads, and on 28 May was defended by two battalions of the 145th infantry brigade – 2nd Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment and 4th Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. Artillery support came in the form of nine 25mm anti-tank guns supplemented, critically, by 15 2-pounders deployed by the Worcestershire Yeomanry. It was these guns that would prove vital in the town's defence.

On the morning of 28 May at 10am, the German oberstleutnant, Richard Koll, launched his assault on Cassel with Panzer-Regiment 11, which is thought to have comprised over 100 tanks, including 25 Panzer IVs and 70 Panzer 35(t)s. As the tanks rumbled forward, the British guns opened fire, though the artillerymen watched in horror as many of their shells ricocheted off the thick front plates of the heavily armoured 35(t)s and the even more muscular Panzer IVs. Still, the British fought bravely, aiming for the tank tracks or blasting away at the Panzers' thinner side armour as they passed their positions.

The Panzer 35(t) with its 37mm cannon and machine guns played a prominent role in the assault on Cassel

According to men in the Worcestershire Yeomanry, by the end of the day the British guns had accounted for 40 enemy tanks, with Harry 'Wally' Munn recording how his gun accounted for three tanks alone. His 2-pounder was sited on the west of Cassel, and his description of the event records how the men in his position saw no fewer than 24 Panzer rumbling steadily towards them. "As the tanks got nearer," he recalled, "we could see the swastika flags on the front."

Though the guns repelled Panzer-Regiment 11, forcing Koll's tanks to clunk off to the north east, the defenders of Cassel were ordered to abandon their position and move towards the evacuation points. Sadly, few made it to Dunkirk. The vast majority were killed or captured. Still, their brave resistance had bought valuable time for many other BEF soldiers.

The BEF lost 216 of its 18-pounder artillery pieces during the 1940 combat in France

The Supermarine Spitfire, like this Mark 1, first saw action over the beaches of Dunkirk

THE RAF

Given the damage suffered by the French Armée de l'Air during the blitzkrieg, and the need for air cover elsewhere in France, it was left to the RAF to carry the fight to the Luftwaffe above Dunkirk evacuations. The RAF's key fighters were the Hawker Hurricane and the Supermarine Spitfire, which comprised 16 squadrons and totalled around 200 aircraft.

The Hawker Hurricane was the mainstay of RAF Fighter Command at this stage, and formed the backbone of the air force that flew into France with the BEF, where they suffered at the hands of the faster Me 109s. Still, the Hurricane was reliable and could take a lot of punishment before it fell from the sky.

The pick of the British fighters was, of course, the Supermarine Spitfire, a supremely elegant and highly manoeuvrable plane that was every bit a match for the Luftwaffe's very best machines. It saw action for the first time during the Dunkirk operations. It was developed from the Supermarine's S6B racing seaplane, which won the Schneider Trophy for Britain in 1931.

It was the Mark I that saw service over Dunkirk. At 9,144 metres it could reach a speed of 506 kilometres per hour, though its maximum speed was 582 kilometres an hour at 5,638 metres. It carried eight Browning .303in machine guns and boasted a combat range of 638 kilometres.

Undoubtedly the most famous fighter of its time, the Spitfire remained in production throughout the war. If it failed to perform to its full potential during the Dunkirk evacuation, this was down to rigid RAF tactics and the inexperience of its newly recruited pilots.

Alongside the Spitfire and Hurricane, the RAF also dispatched the Boulton Paul Defiant, designed to attack enemy bombers while accompanied by Hurricanes, which would hold off enemy fighters. Unlike other fighters, it had no forward-facing armament. Instead, it carried a turret at the rear of the cockpit, where four Browning .303in machine guns could unleash a hail of fire at the slower enemy bomb carriers.

Of course, just as the Luftwaffe bombers came into play over Dunkirk, so did the RAF's, primarily the Bristol Blenheim IV twin-engine light bombers, which sought out the German artillery positions and tried to intercept infantry and panzer columns. Fairey aircraft also played a role, including the Swordfish, a torpedo bomber, which though seemingly anachronistic (it was a biplane), remained in service until the end of war.

"THE PICK OF THE BRITISH FIGHTERS WAS, OF COURSE, THE SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE, AN ELEGANT AND HIGHLY MANOEUVRABLE PLANE EVERY BIT A MATCH FOR THE LUFTWAFFE'S BEST MACHINES"

ICONIC MOMENT

German soldiers relaxing on a field next to Messerschmitt Bf 109, otherwise known as the Me109. It was one of the most advanced fighters of its era and formed the backbone of the Luftwaffe's fighter force.

THE AFTERMATH

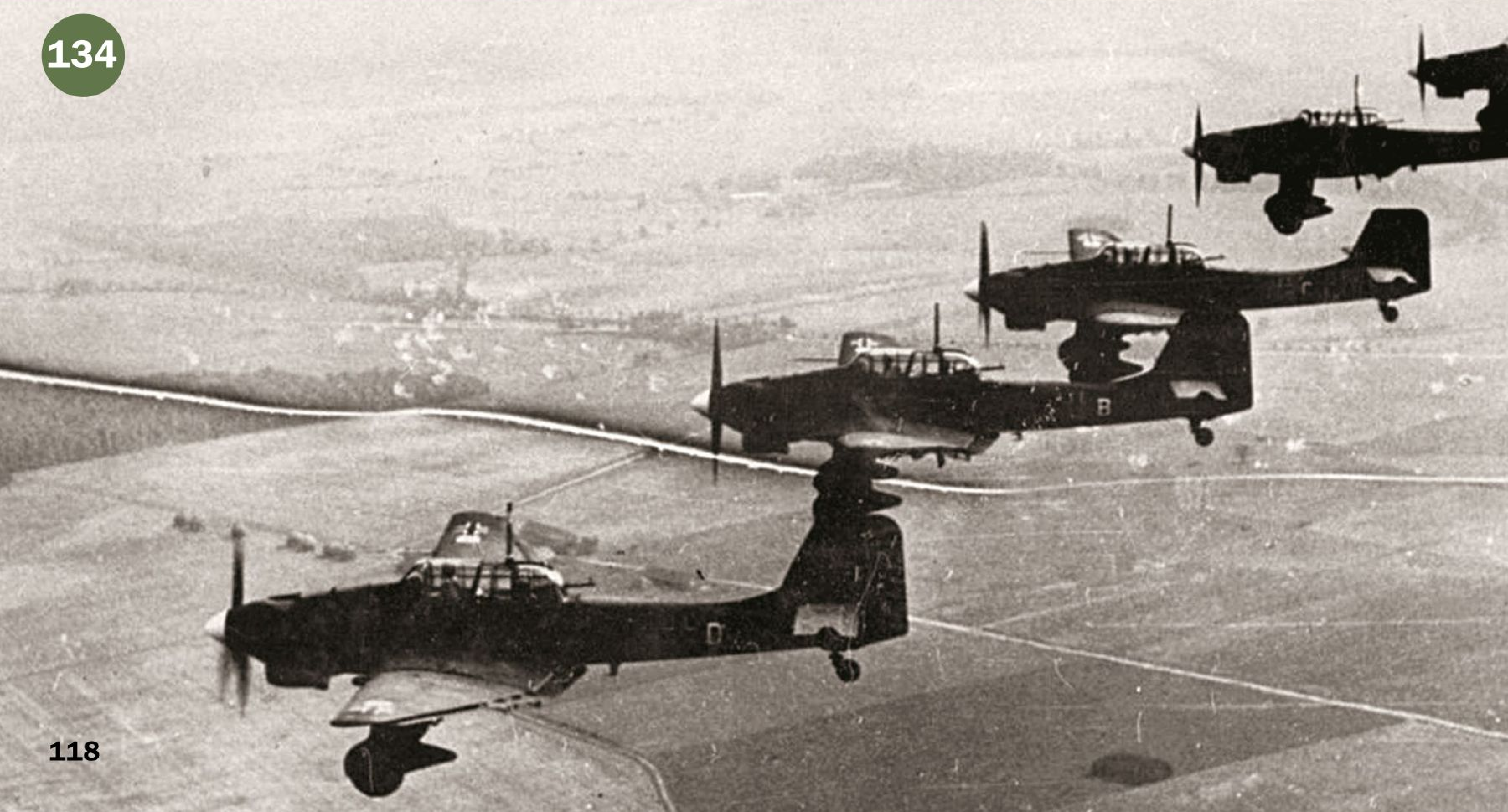
120 **A victory inside deliverance**
The outcome of the Dunkirk evacuation offered hope to the Allies

128 **Facing fresh challenges**
What awaited Britain after it had extricated its army from France

134 **The 'miracle' of Dunkirk?**
Analysing some of the decisions surrounding the evacuation

140 **What if… Heeresgruppe A had been bombed in the Ardennes?**
The German Offensive relied on speed, but all did not go according to plan

120
RAILWAY



128

A VICTORY INSIDE DELIVERANCE

THERE WAS NO DOUBTING THE SCALE OF THE GERMAN VICTORY IN THE OPENING MOVES OF THE WAR, BUT DUNKIRK OFFERED HOPE

On 4 June 1940, Winston Churchill stood before the House of Commons to deliver one of his most famous speeches. The evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was complete, and he had to strike a delicate balance. Euphoria over a desperate retreat would have been absurd, yet the defeat could have been so much worse if the bulk of the BEF had not been brought safely home.

Churchill reminded his audience of how bleak the outlook had been just days earlier. "When, a week ago today, I asked the House to fix this afternoon as the occasion for a statement," he said, "I feared it would be my hard lot to announce the greatest military disaster in our long history."

But the evacuation of Dunkirk had turned out to be far from a disaster. Hard lessons had been learned in the brief Battle of France, and there was no glossing over the fact that Germany had enjoyed a victory of shocking proportions, but the lifting of so many British and French soldiers from the beaches around Dunkirk, and elsewhere, gave the nation something to cling to.

Not that this was merely a symbolic triumph. Churchill, and many others, had reckoned on plucking only 20-30,000 men from France. In fact, 221,504 British troops had been safely brought home before and during Operation Dynamo. A further 122,000 French troops were also evacuated.

"We must be very careful," Churchill warned, "not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations. But there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted."

The Battle of France had been one-sided, and Britain's losses were considerable. More than 11,000 had been killed, while more than 14,000 were wounded. A further 41,338 were either missing or confirmed captured by the Germans. The total loss, 66,426, was enough to temper any elation over the evacuation, but

Men of the BEF remain cheerful as they arrive back in London following their miraculous evacuation

the bulk of the BEF had survived, against the odds, and the fight could go on.

THE PRICE OF DEFEAT

The loss of men was a blow, but perhaps more damaging to the British army was the loss of materiel. The BEF had arrived in France as a relatively small but highly mechanised army. It returned home as something very different.

Some 68,618 military vehicles had been transported to France with the army – fewer than 5,000 came back. The loss was a crippling blow, and it would take a considerable amount of time for the army to be re-equipped.

The story for the artillery was similar. Although 2,794 guns accompanied the BEF to France, 2,472 were left behind. There were only 54 anti-tank guns in the United Kingdom. The upshot was that although enough men had been rescued to form 16 divisions, only three of these could be fully equipped.

The Royal Navy had taken its share of punishment as well. Six destroyers had been sunk during Operation Dynamo, with a further 19 damaged, out of 39 engaged (the French had also lost three destroyers). A total of 226 ships were lost, including many civilian vessels.

However, it was losses in the air that were most concerning. As Britain contemplated

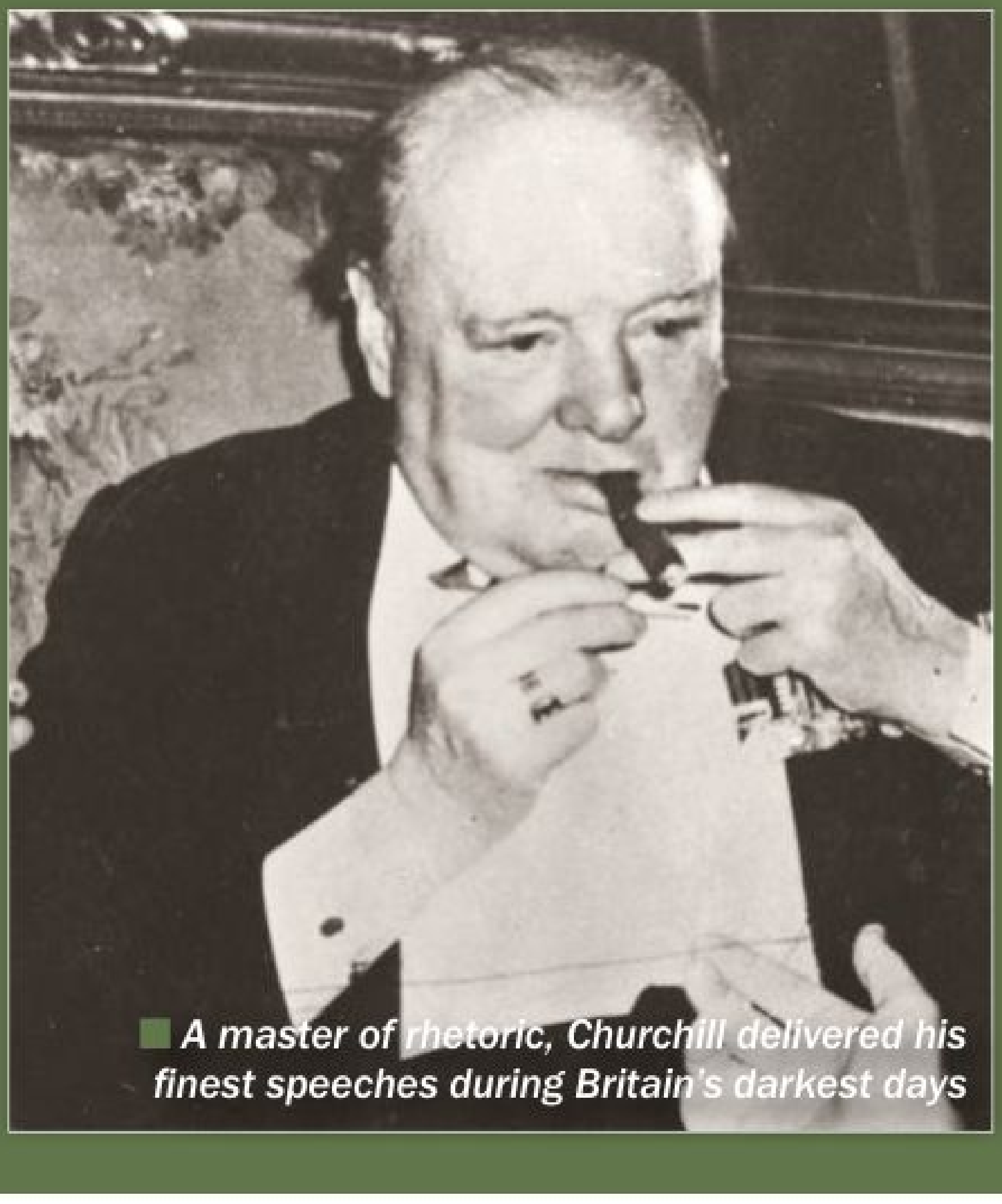
CHURCHILL'S FINEST HOUR

Words had their part to play in the war, and in this regard Britain could more than match the Nazis

Churchill made many famous speeches during the war, fondly remembered by their resonant phrases, including 'the few' and 'their finest hour', but his speech of 4 June 1940 was perhaps his most powerful, with its promise to fight on the beaches and to never surrender – which makes it all the more curious that it was never broadcast to the nation.

Churchill's words in the aftermath of the Dunkirk evacuation were enough to move several members of parliament to tears, and were packed with some of the most vivid phrases from the war.

It would certainly have been enjoyed by a nation hungry for a boost in morale, but after it was delivered in the Commons, only extracts were read out over the radio that evening, and those by a BBC newsreader rather than the great orator himself. The famous recording of Churchill delivering the speech was actually made after the war, in 1949.



A master of rhetoric, Churchill delivered his finest speeches during Britain's darkest days the likelihood of a German invasion attempt, the RAF had been badly mauled. Tactics had evolved over the course of the Dunkirk evacuation, with steadily larger groupings of fighters sent into action to combat the huge German formations attacking Dunkirk, but the cost had been high.

British fighter losses stood at 84, having accounted for just 78 enemy planes. In total, the Battle of France had seen around 1,000 British planes destroyed (numbers vary among different sources), including more than 400 precious fighters. At the beginning of June 1940, only 524 fighters were available according to Hugh Dowding at Fighter Command.

The only consolation was that the Luftwaffe had suffered terribly as well. Although enjoying the advantage of being on the offensive (while the RAF often had to mount patrols in the hope of stumbling into an attacking formation), German losses exceeded 1,814 planes during the Battle of France – about half its strength at the opening of the campaign. Britain might have been in no condition to reject an invasion attempt, but Germany was in no condition to mount one.

BRITAIN AT BAY

The immediate task of what to do with the hundreds of thousands of service personnel returning to Britain was handled in a highly efficient manner. British troops were sent to a series of camps, including ones at Oxford and Aldershot, where they could recover and be reorganised. Many had arrived in Britain in a terrible state, exhausted and in tattered uniforms. Food and clean clothes were essential, but the camps also allowed a definitive tally of the evacuees to be made.

The evacuations were not yet complete, however. In Norway, Britain finally made the decision to withdraw, starting on 4 June. On the same day that the last men were retrieved from Dunkirk, the first British soldiers were evacuated from Narvik.

The Norway campaign may have also ended in failure, but it served a similar function to that in France, by weakening German forces.

RAILWAY
HENRY TELFER LTD

Tea and sandwiches for evacuated troops – even those who brought a souvenir of the fighting in France back with them

A LA GLORIEUSE MEMOIRE DES
AVIATEURS MARINS ET SOLDATS
DES ARMEES FRANCAISES ET ALLIEES
QUI SE SACRIFIERENT DANS LA BATAILLE
DE DUNKERQUE MAI JUIN 1940

Lest we forget: the memorial at Dunkirk to those who died during the evacuation

DEATH OF LANCASTRIA

The evacuations from France saw the single biggest loss of life in British maritime history

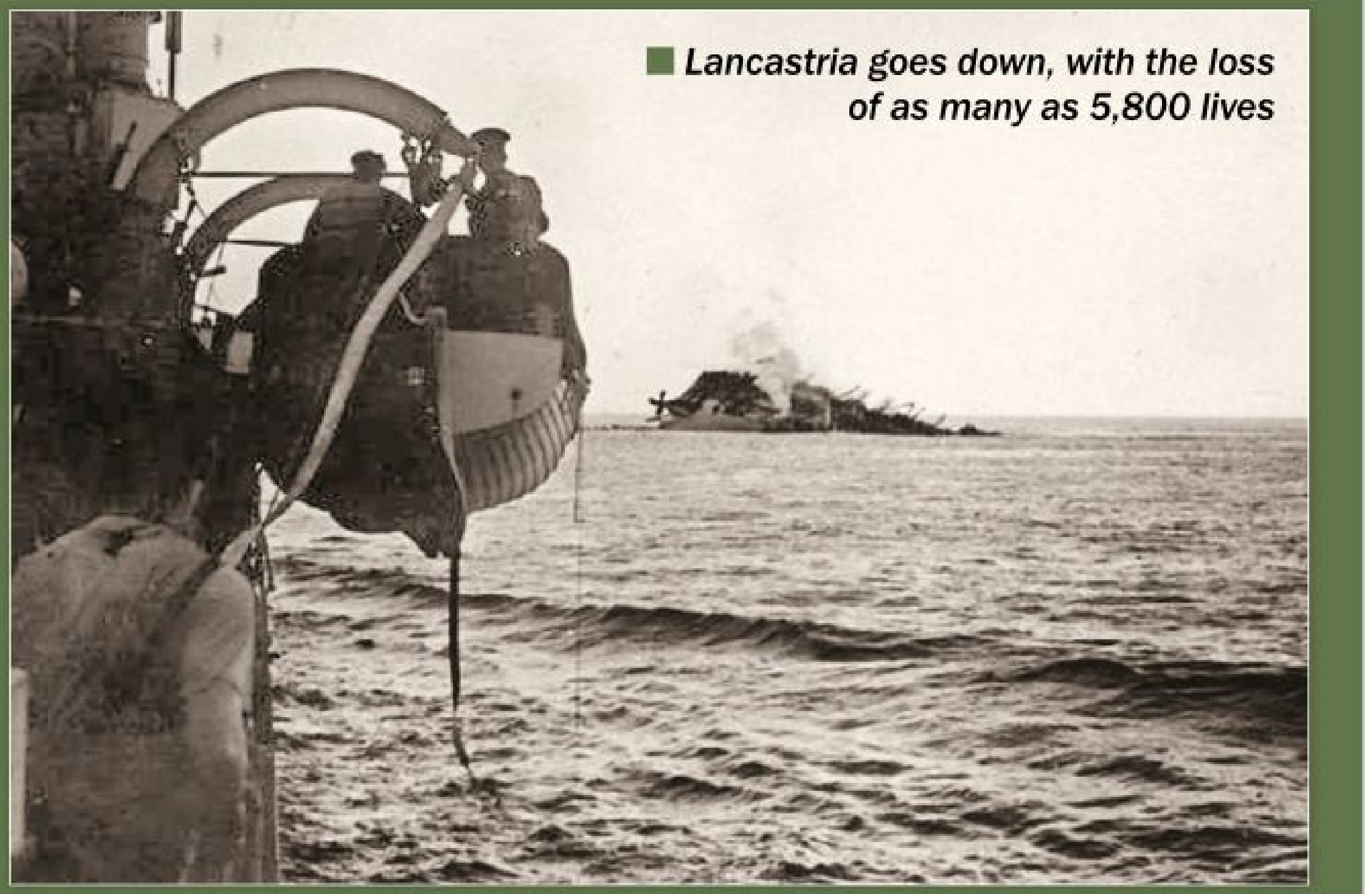
The Titanic remains the most infamous maritime disaster, while the sinking of Lusitania is remembered from World War I, but when HMT Lancastria was sunk while evacuating troops as part of Operation Aerial, the loss of life was equal to the Titanic and Lusitania disasters combined.

Lancastria had contributed to the evacuation of British troops from Norway, and was then directed to take part in Aerial. The ocean-going liner, with a displacement of 16,243 tons, was one of the biggest ships off St Nazaire and, as such, made an inviting target.

Creaking with evacuees, the ship's captain, Rudolph Sharp, decided to wait for a destroyer escort before heading off, but also neglected to get underway to at least present a moving target to the Luftwaffe bombers.

Perhaps inevitably, Ju 88s scored three or possibly four hits, causing the ship to list to starboard. Inside of 20 minutes it had sunk, with burning oil making the sea even more lethal than it already was for those tipped into it.

Almost incredibly, the number of survivors (reported at 2,447) actually exceeded the ship's total capacity. With the total numbers on board at the time of the tragedy unknown, estimates for the loss of life range from 3,000 to 5,800.



Lancastria goes down, with the loss of as many as 5,800 lives

DUNKIRK
1940
DUNKIRK VETERANS ASSOCIATION EAST KENT

Erected in 1975, the memorial at Dover remembers the amazing feats that played out across the Channel

186 trains were laid on to transport the British evacuees to their camps west of London

In France, it had been the Luftwaffe that had suffered; in Norway it was the Kriegsmarine – a heavy cruiser, two light cruisers, ten destroyers, a torpedo boat and six U-boats had been lost, with more damaged, further hampering any hopes of a rapid invasion of Britain.

Even so, on 29 May the British chiefs of staff had expressed their concern that an invasion might be imminent. In his speech of 4 June, Churchill made mention of the danger: "…the whole of the Channel ports are in [the enemy's] hands, with all the tragic consequences that follow from that," he reported, "and we must expect another blow to be struck almost immediately at us or at France."

Fears over the ability to resist an invasion had lurked in the background throughout the retreat to Dunkirk. More fighters could have been released to patrol the skies over the evacuation site, but with losses running so high it was considered reckless; the Hurricanes and Spitfires would be needed soon enough to protect Britain's shores.

Still, it was essential to maintain a presence in France, if only to persuade the French to continue resistance as long as possible. There were still 100,000 British troops in France, as well as nine squadrons (three of fighters and six of bombers). Churchill agreed to keep these squadrons at full strength, as well as sending over two more, but he stopped well short of the 20 squadrons that the French were requesting as they prepared for the next stage of the struggle.

A new defensive line had been adopted, along the Somme and Aisne rivers. The British 51st Division was among their number and the French General Maxime Weygand demanded more. The first men Britain sent, however, were the French evacuees from Dunkirk, who must have dreaded returning to the fray. Many were on their way back within 24 hours of reaching Britain, and almost all within two days. Only the 2,000 or so wounded were allowed to remain in Britain.

THE LAST EVACUATIONS

The fate of France was, by now, all but inevitable. The French army had lost something like 1.2 million men – killed, wounded and captured – during the fighting so far (around 40,000 had been captured at Dunkirk as the defensive perimeter finally collapsed under German pressure).

It was too severe a loss to recover from. The French army now numbered just 64 divisions, and many of the men were badly shaken. Many others had not even seen a German, but with more than 100 enemy divisions opposing them, the situation was grim. Weygand in particular appeared close to losing his nerve, demanding British reinforcements and American intervention.

On 5 June, the day following the last evacuations from Dunkirk, Germany initiated Fall Rot (Case Red), aimed at the final destruction of France as a fighting force. Fighting as part of the French IX Corps, the 51st Division was obliged to follow orders from its French corps commanders. Its own commanding officer, Major General Victor Fortune, was aware of the danger of delaying extraction, but a show of solidarity needed to be made. As it turned out, his division would be sacrificed for that show.

Although French forces put up more resistance than previously, they were steadily pushed back from their defensive line. The 51st Division attempted to reach Le Havre for evacuation (as part of Operation Cycle), only to be cut off by panzer units commanded by Erwin Rommel on 10 June. Redirecting for Saint-Valéry, the 51st reached the coast and attempts were made to form a perimeter similar to the one that had successfully held the Germans at bay at Dunkirk. Fortune was determined to continue to hold out even as late as 12 June, but with French units surrendering around him he was unable to maintain the perimeter. A little over 2,000 men from the 51st were evacuated, but more than 8,000 were captured.

The 51st, however, were not the only British in theatre. The effort to keep the French motivated was underlined by the fact that 60,000 British troops were landed back in France after the Dunkirk evacuation. Under General Sir Alan Brooke, the 52nd Division and parts of the 1st Canadian Division had joined up with what remained of the 1st Armoured Division to form a new BEF. It was not to be in France for long.

Brooke had only crossed the Channel on 12 June (the 52nd Division had started to ferry over on 7 June, while Canadian units had been transported on the night of 12-13 June) and did not meet up with the French commander-in-chief until two days later. What he saw and heard during his meeting with Weygand convinced him that the game was up. The French high command was in turmoil and also seemed to be in a defeatist frame of mind.

On Brooke's advice, further shipments of men to France were halted (two further divisions were to have followed) and the 2nd BEF was ordered to the coast for evacuation. There was an uncomfortable moment when Churchill personally intervened and ordered Brooke to stand his ground and fight alongside the French. The British were there to create a feeling that Britain was still supporting France, he explained to Brooke, who calmly replied that: "it was impossible to make a corpse feel."

About 200,000 soldiers were picked up by ships at the East Mole, nearly twice the number evacuated from the beaches

"THE EFFORT TO KEEP THE FRENCH MOTIVATED WAS UNDERLINED BY THE FACT THAT 60,000 BRITISH TROOPS WERE LANDED BACK IN FRANCE AFTER THE DUNKIRK EVACUATION"

Churchill finally relented, but the final wave of extractions was not officially authorised until 16 June. Operation Aerial subsequently saw 124,000 army and air force personnel brought back from France. The final evacuation was not without its share of tragedy, including the sinking of HMT Lancastria, with huge loss of life.

FRANCE FALLS

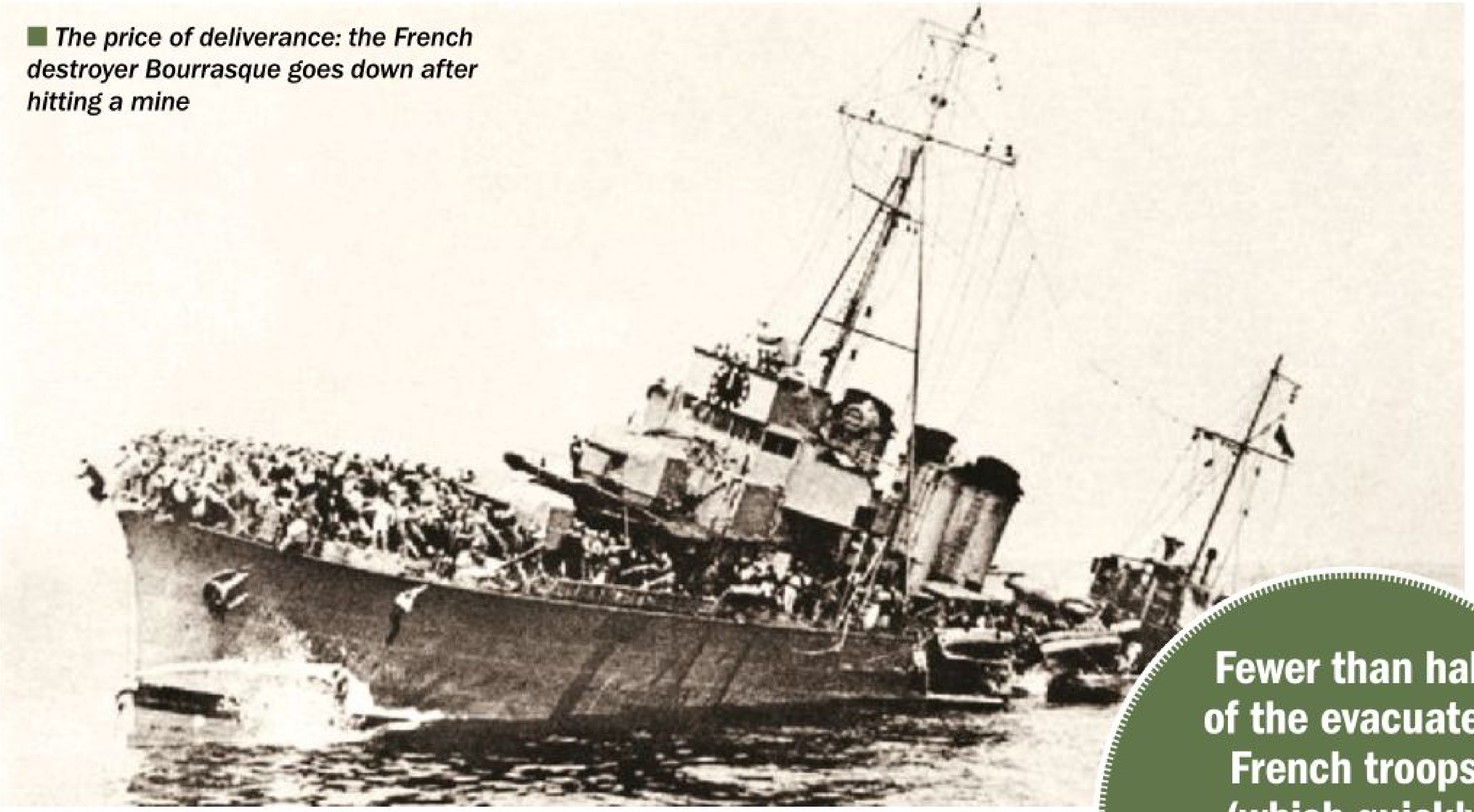
On 14 June, German troops occupied Paris. By now, Weygand, with the support of Marshal Philippe Pétain, was openly considering options for an armistice with Germany, although Paul Reynaud, prime minister since March, was firmly opposed to this.

Efforts to keep the French in the fight now reached frantic levels. General Charles de Gaulle, determined to carry on, had raised the possibility of fighting the Germans in North Africa if and when France itself fell; he was dispatched by Reynaud to London to discuss the options for cooperation with the British. While in London, he learned of a desperate plan to join Britain and France as a single country, in a Franco-British Union. Unlikely and extreme as the measure was, Churchill seemed willing to seek the approval of his cabinet.

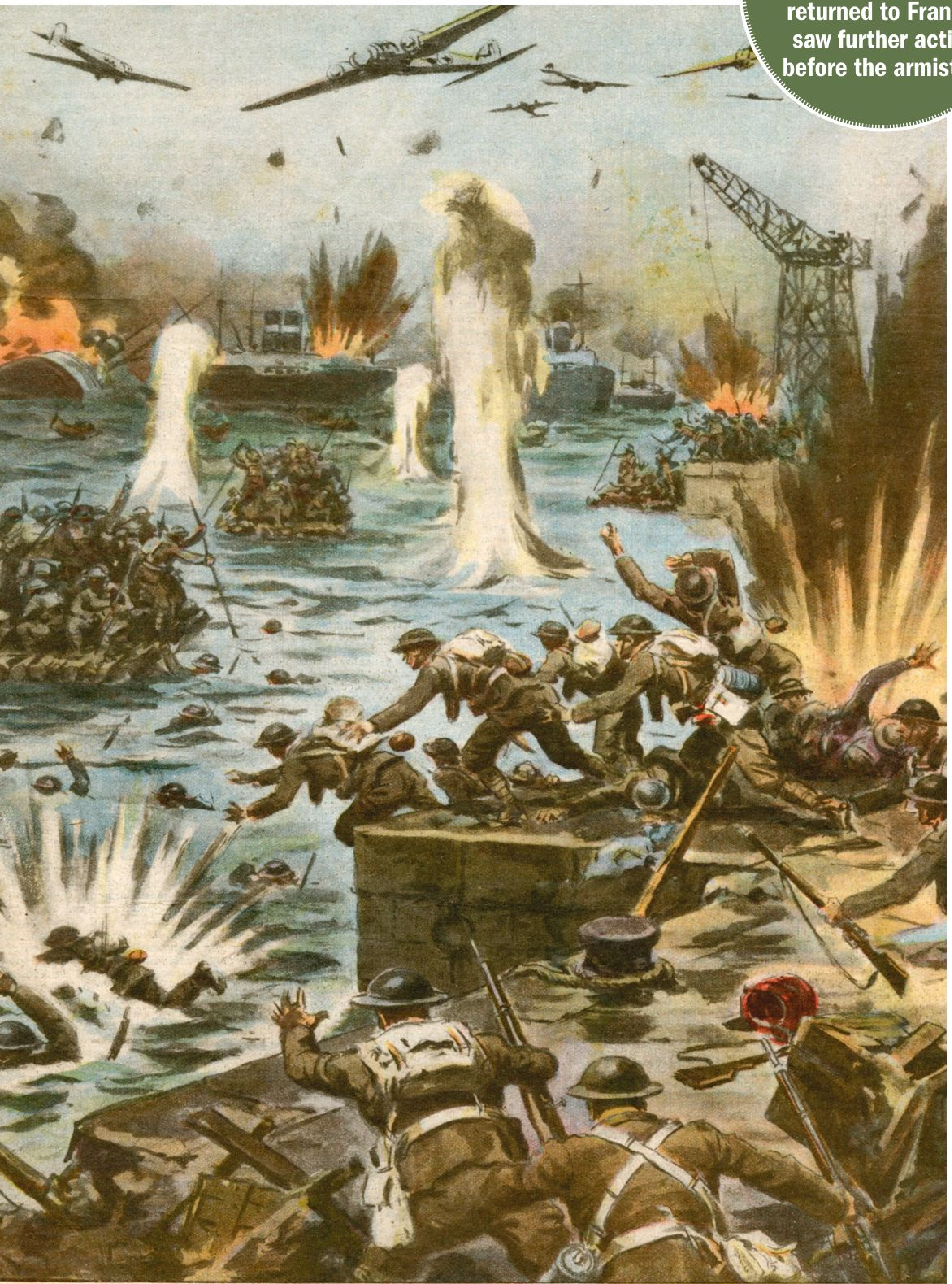
Reynaud was overjoyed at the offer, but was soon to be stunned as his own cabinet rejected it, with some muttering that Nazi rule was preferable to such a union. Relations between the two countries, historically difficult, had been strained still further by the stresses of war. The French believed Britain had left them in the lurch, evacuating its troops instead of making a stand alongside its ally. The British, in turn, felt that the French had performed abysmally in the Battle for France, and could scarcely believe they had folded so quickly under the German onslaught.

It was not an atmosphere for successfully forming a union between the two nations, however much was at stake. The last chance to keep France in the war, desperate as it may have been, had passed. Reynaud's resignation and the forming of a new French government, with Pétain at its head, quickly led to an armistice with Germany (signed on 22 June). The Battle of France was over.

Survivors from Mona's Queen, which struck a mine and sank on its way to Dunkirk



The price of deliverance: the French destroyer Bourrasque goes down after hitting a mine



Fewer than half of the evacuated French troops (which quickly returned to France) saw further action before the armistice

THE FRENCH FLEET

Almost lost in the chaos was the fact that a new belligerent had entered the war. On 10 June, Mussolini had delivered a speech declaring war, which had been met mostly by silence among the listening crowd, although many young men saw this as the great adventure of their lives and rushed to enlist. One result of the declaration was that Britain now had to factor in a powerful Italian navy, and that suddenly made the situation of the French navy even more critical.

With the Kriegsmarine having suffered such heavy losses in the Norway campaign, an injection of ships from the French fleet would be very welcome. But with the addition of the Italian navy, the odds could tip dangerously against the Royal Navy.

The situation escalated when Pétain, fearing German reprisals, refused to allow the fleet to be sailed to America. German assurances had been given that they would not take over the French shipping; under the terms of the armistice, German and Italian authorities would oversee the demobilisation of the fleet. Few actually believed this promise would be kept. The French fleet, after all, was the fourth largest in the world.

The port of Mers-el-Kébir, in French Algeria, was the destination for the bulk of the ships, where they soon found themselves blockaded by 'Force H' from the Royal Navy, with a mission to get hold of the ships – or sink them.

Tragically (French admiral Marcel-Bruno Gensoul was keen to fight alongside the Royal Navy), terms of a surrender could not be agreed and, on 2 July, Force H attacked. France's final humiliation was to see its fleet destroyed, with the deaths of 1,297 sailors, by its ally.

THE 'BITTER WEEDS'

Britain now readied itself for the struggle to come. Back in May, authorisation had been given for the formation of a Local Volunteer Force, the forerunner of the Home Guard ('Dad's Army'), and it quickly grew to a strength of 600,000. Britain had lost much of its equipment in France, but it still had its formidable economic power to fall back on; desperately short of rifles, it bought 1.2 million of them from America.

Experience could not be bought so easily, but the evacuated men of the BEF had tasted battle and had a better appreciation of their enemy. Likewise, the pilots of the RAF had matched themselves against the best of the Luftwaffe and, although they had suffered greatly, they too had learned valuable lessons.

In his famous speech of 4 June, Churchill had declared Britain's intention to carry on. The fight was likely to be arduous in the extreme, but the evacuations, especially that at Dunkirk, had made the prospect a little less daunting.

"We are told that Herr Hitler has a plan for invading the British Isles," he had informed the House of Commons. "This has often been thought of before. When Napoleon lay at Boulogne for a year with his flat-bottomed boats and his Grand Army, he was told by someone, 'There are bitter weeds in England'. There are certainly a great many more of them since the British Expeditionary Force returned."

ICONIC MOMENT

Artillery left on the beaches after the British retreat. All of the heavy equipment had to be either burned or simply left behind. It took many months for the British army to properly resupply.

FACING FRESH CHALLENGES

BRITAIN HAD EXTRICATED THE BULK OF ITS ARMY FROM THE CHAOS OF FRANCE, BUT FRESH CHALLENGES NOW HAD TO BE FACED

With the fall of France, Britain was isolated in Europe, but still far from alone. The Empire countries stood ready, and there was hope that America would join the war sooner rather than later.

Churchill's speech of 4 June 1940, in fact, made explicit reference to the strength of the Empire, the enduring might of the Royal Navy, and the need for the New World (America) to come to the aid of the Old. The plea is often overlooked, because it came immediately after his pledge that Britain would never surrender, which is where most analysis of Churchill's words stops.

Churchill had actually continued to perhaps his most important part of the entire speech: "…even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving," he said, "then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the Old."

Churchill's words had been chosen carefully. Unsure that Britain could keep the Nazis at bay, America had asked for assurances that the struggle would continue even if the feared invasion was successful.

There was still an outside chance that the invasion might not even happen. Hitler pondered long and hard following the fall of France. He appears to have hoped that Britain might come to the negotiating table after the stunning German success, and his inability to make up his mind gave valuable breathing space for Britain. Its army had been battered, but the next stage of the fighting would see the focus shift to the RAF and the Royal Navy.

CLOSING THE READINESS GAP

It was recognised by all parties that air superiority would be needed before Hitler could start to ship troops over the Channel. With Hugh Dowding's dispiriting report on the number of fighters available, Britain needed to take advantage of what would probably be a very small window of opportunity.

Time had already been gained while Germany was engaged with Fall Rot, and even after France had fallen, there was a huge amount of work to do before the Luftwaffe could take on its British counterpart. The primary German fighter, the Messerschmitt Bf 109, was a short-range plane and would need to operate from new airfields in France in order to comfortably

“ITS ARMY HAD BEEN BATTERED, BUT THE NEXT STAGE OF THE FIGHTING WOULD SEE THE FOCUS SHIFT TO THE RAF AND THE ROYAL NAVY”

Although it fought in smaller numbers than the Hurricane, the Supermarine Spitfire achieved iconic status during the Battle of Britain reach Britain. These airfields needed to be constructed, along with the supporting anti-aircraft emplacements and quarters.

On 17 May, Britain had created the Ministry of Aircraft Production, headed by Lord Beaverbrook. As a Canadian newspaper magnate he appeared a strange choice, but his business savvy, not to mention his willingness to bully if the job required it, was a perfect fit for the unusual demands of the moment.

One of his first decisions was one of the most important – the limiting of fighter production to just two types (the Spitfire and Hurricane) and that of bombers to just three (the Blenheim, Whitley and Hampden). Pushing his workforce to the limit, they began to crank out this streamlined production line at an astonishing rate. Just when they were needed most, aircraft rolled out of the factories in huge numbers. A total of 446 fighters were built during the month of June, and by the end of that month production was running at 300 new planes per week.

Equally important was the fact that this was outstripping Luftwaffe production by a ratio of two to one.

With the repair of stricken aircraft also revitalised, and with radar and the 30,000 volunteers of the Observer Corps, the RAF gradually found itself in a much stronger position as the Battle of Britain loomed on the horizon.

Less critically, but still of great importance, the Royal Navy's losses during the evacuations had no doubt hampered its ability to resist an invasion, but the Kriegsmarine had suffered even more. The declaration of war by Italy had added its ships to the forces ranged against Britain, but the brutal removal of the French fleet from the equation left matters in a relatively comfortable state. The challenge at sea was not going to be one of fleets clashing, however. It was to be one of merchant ships and predatory packs of U-boats.

THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

Britain's war economy faced a serious threat with the closing off of Europe. Key raw materials could still be imported from the Empire or from the United States, but travel times would inevitably be greatly increased, and transportation would run the gauntlet of the U-boat threat. (Often overlooked, but of great importance in this regard, was the addition of the Norwegian merchant fleet, which had sailed to Britain following the fall of Norway.)

America was edging closer to full involvement in the war, but that could not be relied upon to arrive quickly. In any case, the American economy would take time to switch to a war footing, although President Roosevelt was finding it possible to do so under the guise of providing Britain with materials, soothing the concerns of a population largely unwilling to be dragged into another European war.

The main item on Britain's shopping list, however, remained elusive. Churchill had asked for 50 American destroyers. World War I vintage they may have been, but defence of shipping lanes was by now of paramount importance. Germany was enjoying 'the Happy Time', with new bases available in France and the end of the Norway campaign freeing U-boats for attacks on British shipping. Churchill himself admitted that this was the only thing that had really frightened him during the entire war and even obsolescent destroyers would be of use.

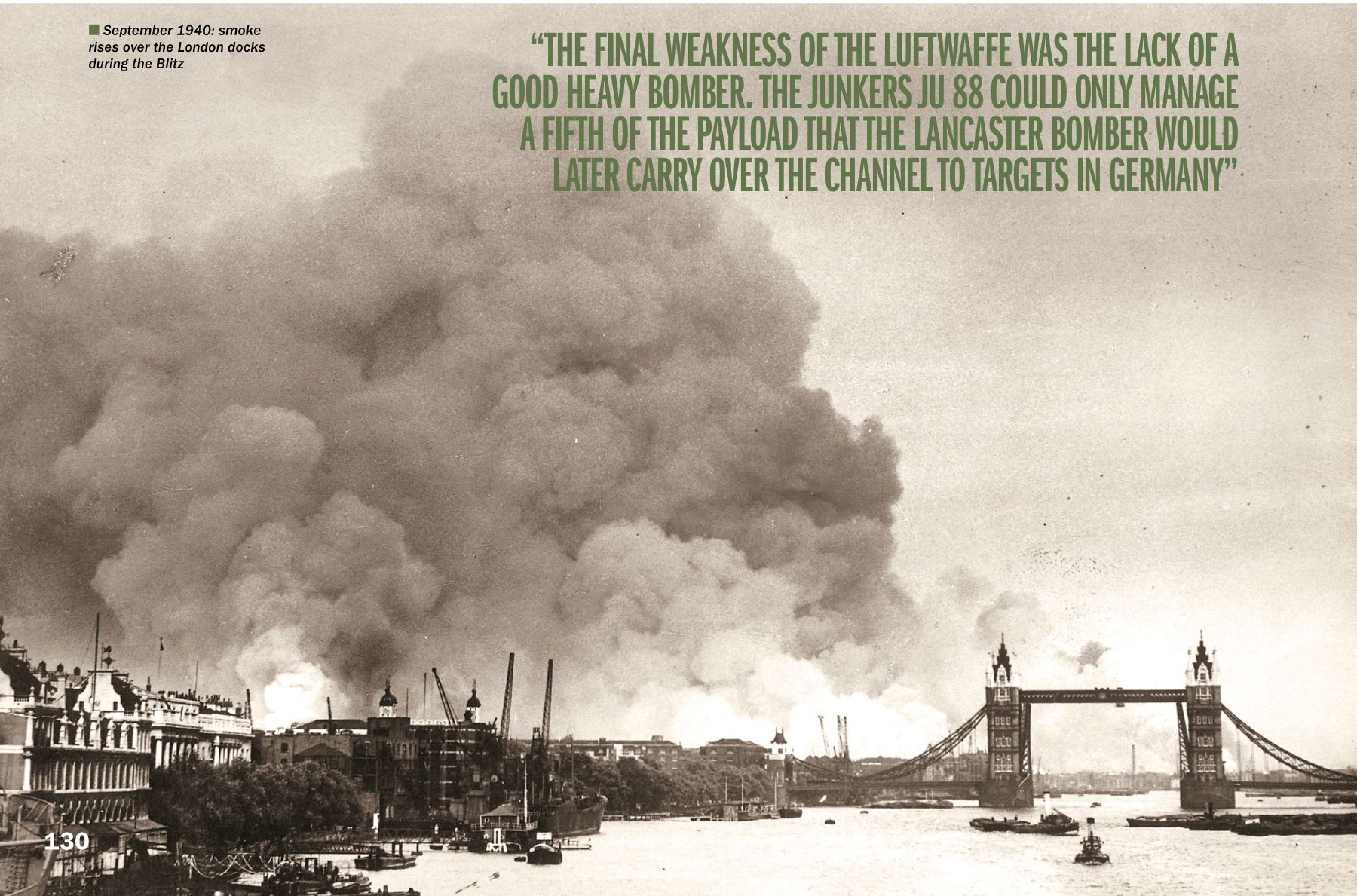
It was not until Britain was creaking under the combined assault of the U-boats and the Luftwaffe that Roosevelt finally agreed, handing over the ships in exchange for leases on sections of a range of British possessions, where the US could build naval or air force bases. The 50 destroyers were signed over to the Royal Navy on 2 September 1940.

THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

By this time, the Battle of Britain was raging. In the Battle of France, the Luftwaffe had enjoyed the benefit of acting in conjunction with fast-moving ground forces, and often had no British planes to worry about at all. Now, with the RAF operating at home, it was the Luftwaffe that was stretched.

Recognising the threat of the RAF's fighters, twin-engined Bf 110s were initially employed in an attempt to draw fighter squadrons away from Germany's massed bomber formations, which flew under an umbrella of Bf 109 formations. The 110s, however, were destroyed in large numbers and eventually required escorts of their own. Moreover, the Stuka, the

"THE FINAL WEAKNESS OF THE LUFTWAFFE WAS THE LACK OF A GOOD HEAVY BOMBER. THE JUNKERS JU 88 COULD ONLY MANAGE A FIFTH OF THE PAYLOAD THAT THE LANCASTER BOMBER WOULD LATER CARRY OVER THE CHANNEL TO TARGETS IN GERMANY"



September 1940: smoke rises over the London docks during the Blitz

THE 'WONDERFUL MADMEN'

The Polish pilots who fought in the Battle of Britain were among the RAF's best

Britain was never really alone during the early months of World War II. Even following the fall of Poland, Belgium, Norway and France, brave soldiers, sailors and airmen from the defeated nations continued to fight against the Nazis.

The Polish servicemen of 303 Squadron are among the most famous. By the time they found themselves in Britain (the 'island of last hope' as they put it), they had been fighting the Germans for almost a year. Starting with the futile defence of their own country, they had plotted a course via Romania, Hungary and France. The Battle of France saw 130 Polish pilots see action, sometimes in obsolescent planes like the Caudron-Renault C.714 Cyclone, and when France in turn fell, the Poles moved on once more.

Polish pilots of 303 Squadron in front of a Hurricane bearing the squadron symbol

Their fighting quality was not in question (13 of them lost their lives over France, but they accounted for 60 German planes), but they also had a reputation for recklessness. As the Battle of Britain got underway, they were initially kept on the sidelines, learning how to fly their new Hurricanes and desperate to rejoin the fight.

When they did, they showed what they could do with quality planes. Flying first as part of existing squadrons, the benefit of amalgamating them into Polish squadrons was soon recognised. The fourth such formation, 303 Squadron, entered action on 31 August, and they made a splash by downing six 109s on their first sortie.

In fact, 303 Squadron did so well, some began to suspect their figures were imaginary, prompting an inspection. After watching nine 303 Squadron Hurricanes account for eight Luftwaffe planes, losing just one of their own in return, Group Captain Stanley Vincent happily declared that the Poles were "wonderful madmen."

As well as staggering successes (on 11 September the squadron shot down 17 German planes in 15 minutes), 303 Squadron suffered its share of losses. Nevertheless, it finished the Battle of Britain with 126 kills, for the loss of nine of its pilots. A memorial to the Polish airmen (a total of 2,408 Poles died while serving with the RAF during the war) was unveiled in 1948.

very emblem of Nazi power during the Battle of France, proved vulnerable and unsuited to this new campaign.

The final weakness of the Luftwaffe was the lack of a good heavy bomber. The Junkers Ju 88 could only manage a fifth of the payload that the Lancaster bomber would later carry over the Channel to targets in Germany.

The RAF, blessed with two exceptional fighter planes, divided their duties. Hurricanes went after the bomber formations, while Spitfires tackled the fighter escorts. The Spitfire is lauded, but Germany's 109 was actually superior in many respects, including armament, where twin 20mm cannons joined its two 7.9mm machine guns to pack a much heavier punch than its British opponents.

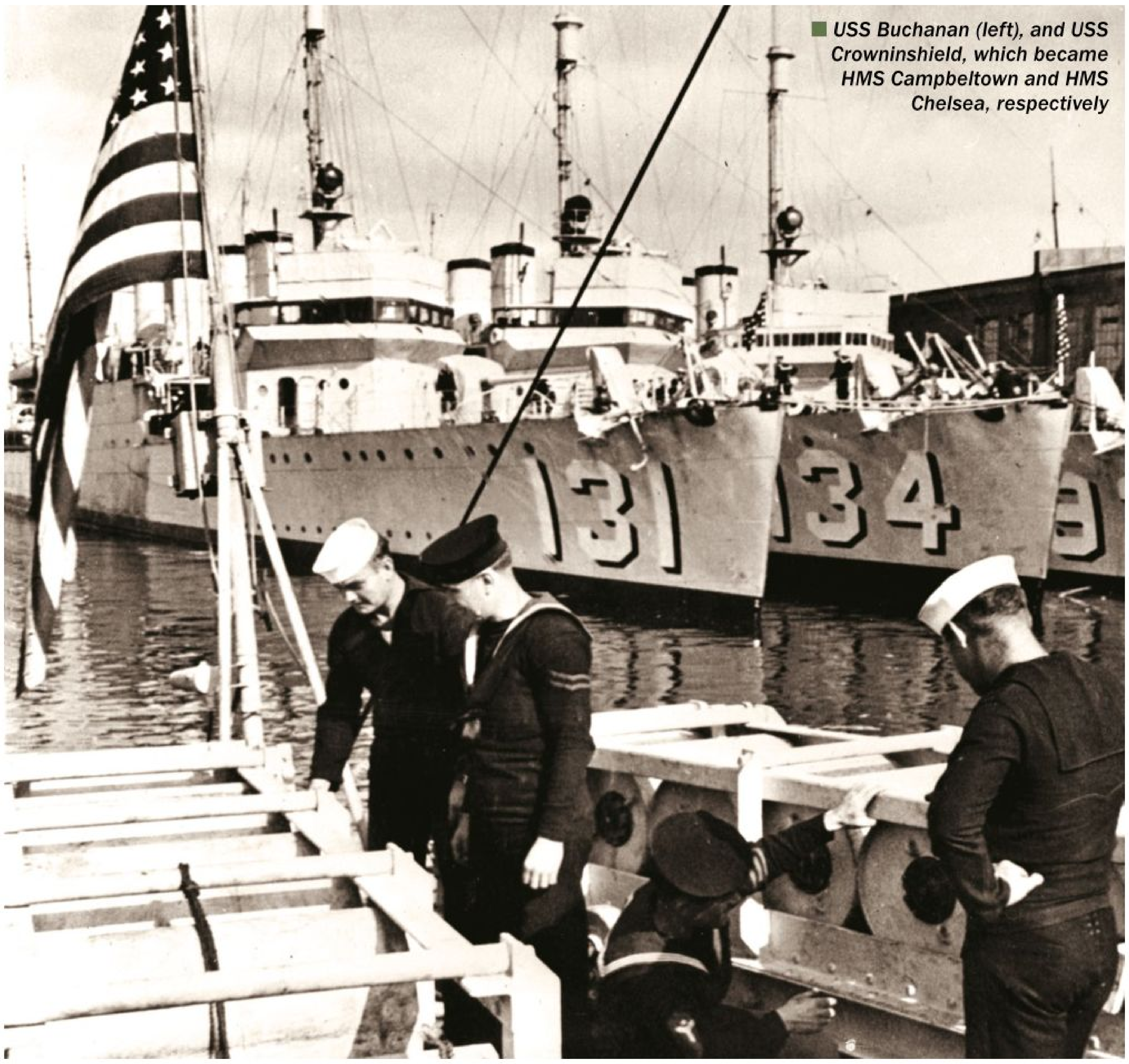
Repeated attacks on RAF airfields were taking their toll, but by 20 August, Churchill felt confident enough to paint a comforting picture in a speech to the Commons. While not ignoring the hardships that had been endured (he referred to a "cataract of disaster" pouring out over the nation), he insisted that the storm was being weathered.

"We have never had armies like this in our Island in time of war," he claimed, referring to the two million armed men and the fact that the nation now "bristles against invaders, from the sea or from the air."

Following the shocking events in France, the desperate retreat, the miraculous evacuations and the determined rearming of the nation, Britain – in Churchill's eyes – was stronger than ever, and the Empire was virtually indestructible.

"The dangers we face are still enormous," he admitted, "but so are our advantages and resources. I recount them because the people have a right to know that there are solid grounds for the confidence which we feel, and that we have good reason to believe ourselves capable, as I said in a very dark hour two months ago, of continuing the war 'if necessary alone, if necessary for years'."

A subsequent shift of focus for the German air campaign would prove important. Around 7 September, RAF bases ceased to be the main targets, and attention shifted to Britain's cities, as the blitz attempted to crush British morale. The effect this had on the outcome of the campaign has been heavily debated, but what is not disputed is the fact that the Luftwaffe had failed to break the RAF, and the proposed invasion of Britain had to be postponed. For the second time, following his failure to destroy the troops waiting to be evacuated from Dunkirk, Hermann Göring had failed his Führer.


USS Buchanan (left), and USS Crowninshield, which became HMS Campbeltown and HMS Chelsea, respectively

ICONIC MOMENT

RAF troops during the evacuation from France. Passengers would stay on the deck of the ships so that if the vessels were hit during evacuation, they were not stuck inside as it sank.

THE 'MIRACLE' OF DUNKIRK?

ANALYSING SOME OF THE KEY DECISIONS SURROUNDING THE DUNKIRK EVACUATIONS REVEALS MORE THAN A FEW DIFFERENCES OF OPINION

The evacuation of the bulk of the British Expeditionary Force was viewed in different ways by the countries involved in the titanic struggle. For the Germans, it seemed irrelevant after their stunning victory, perhaps the greatest demolition of an equally matched opponent in the history of warfare.

For the French it was a humiliation and also a betrayal by the British, who evacuated rather than stood alongside their allies and fought on. For the Americans, it was a symbol of defiance and nothing less than a victory in the face of Nazi aggression. For Britain, it was a near-miraculous recovery from a dire position, a restoration of hope when it had seemed on the verge of being snuffed out completely.

Because Britain went on to hold out against Germany until America joined the war effort, and because that effort eventually led to a hard-won victory, Dunkirk has been viewed as the starting point for the fightback against Hitler, the seeds of 1945 having been planted on the beaches of Dunkirk. At the time, however, not knowing what would come in the following months, and aware that Germany was planning an invasion of Britain, it was far less easy to see a prophecy of victory in the shattering defeat that had led to the fall of France.

THE DECISION TO EVACUATE

In retrospect it seems obvious that Britain needed to get as many of its troops as possible out of the death-trap around Dunkirk. The fact that France fell so quickly afterwards makes it obvious that standing their ground would only have led to total annihilation.

Major General Julian Thompson (former royal marine and author of *Dunkirk: Retreat*

Troops awaiting evacuation on the beaches at Dunkirk would certainly not have felt that they were participating in any sort of triumph *to Victory*) has no doubts it was the only possible decision, and also believes the French were wrong to feel that Britain had left them in the lurch. "It was the only option," he explains. "The British had to go because the French had collapsed."

Still, resentment would burn for a long time afterwards, fuelled by German propaganda. Britain had nothing to be ashamed of, and more than 100,000 of the French soldiers who were also lifted from Dunkirk made their escape on British ships.

The matter of the infamous 'halt order' is not quite as clear-cut. Thompson believes the Germans had solid reasons for halting their panzers, even if, in retrospect, it appears to have been a mistake.

"The halt order allowed the BEF to get away," Thompson admits, "but it made sense to the Germans at the time.

"The area round Dunkirk was difficult for armour to operate in, and there was every reason to believe that the BEF could be left to the mainly infantry Army Group B to sort out."

The haunting memory of 1914, and the failure to knock the French out when it had seemed possible, must also have played its part in the decision.

"The next item on the agenda was the French army south of the Somme," says Thompson. "In the German mind was the near success of the 1914 plan and how the French made a comeback at the Marne. They did not want to risk a repeat."

Perhaps calmer heads would have realised that France was ready to topple, and that knocking Britain out of the war at the same time should have been the focus. In any case, the halt order did not decide the issue; it merely gave the British more time. The fact that they put the extra time to such good use was down to their professionalism and courage under extreme pressure. Calling the evacuation a 'miracle' downplays the performance of the people involved.

"The final tally of evacuees was the result of the power and skill of the Royal Navy and the contribution of the RAF," Thompson believes. "The only 'miraculous' element in the equation was the calm weather."

THE LITTLE SHIPS

The popular view of the evacuation is of ordinary civilians taking their boats across the Channel to pick up a few soldiers and then heading back to England. Although only partly accurate (most of these private vessels were handled by Royal Navy personnel for the evacuation), the 'little ships' did play their part, and their propaganda value was immense.

"The 'little ships' did make a difference in ferrying out soldiers to ships offshore," explains Thompson, "but not in taking them direct to England (only a very small number did this). Nearly three times as many troops were evacuated from Dunkirk harbour as were taken off the beaches."

As well as the pure mechanics of the evacuation, the stoicism of the men waiting to be shipped out was remarkable. Only at the last moment, when an attempt was made to whisk away the last men, who had been holding the defensive perimeter, did this discipline threaten to break down. It was no shame when it did, as these men knew they were in a race to get away and were also hampered by the thousands who had been hiding in the area coming out of their boltholes in the final, mad scramble.

Prior to this, men had waited, grimly but patiently, for their turn to be evacuated, and had even at times calmly returned to the sand dunes when they were unable to get on a ship. Panic could so easily have spread and transformed the story into one with little or no glory at all.

THE FAILURE OF THE LUFTWAFFE

The evacuation also had much to do with the poor performance of the Luftwaffe, which had

promised to prevent the BEF from getting away. "The Luftwaffe failed," says Thompson, "and not for the last time."

Not only was the Battle of Britain also destined to end up as a humiliating failure, there were more to come as the war progressed. "Perhaps Stalingrad was the classic," Thompson believes, "when Göring promised to keep Von Paulus's Sixth Army supplied – and failed dismally."

The failure of the Luftwaffe to prevent the evacuation was not through want of trying, and it inflicted serious losses on British and French shipping, as well as the RAF. Many Tommies, awaiting evacuation, felt that the RAF had abandoned them to their fate. Churchill himself took great pains to debunk this myth.

"Many of our soldiers coming back have not seen the Air Force at work," Churchill informed the House of Commons on 4 June 1940. "They saw only the bombers which escaped its protective attack. They underrate its achievements."

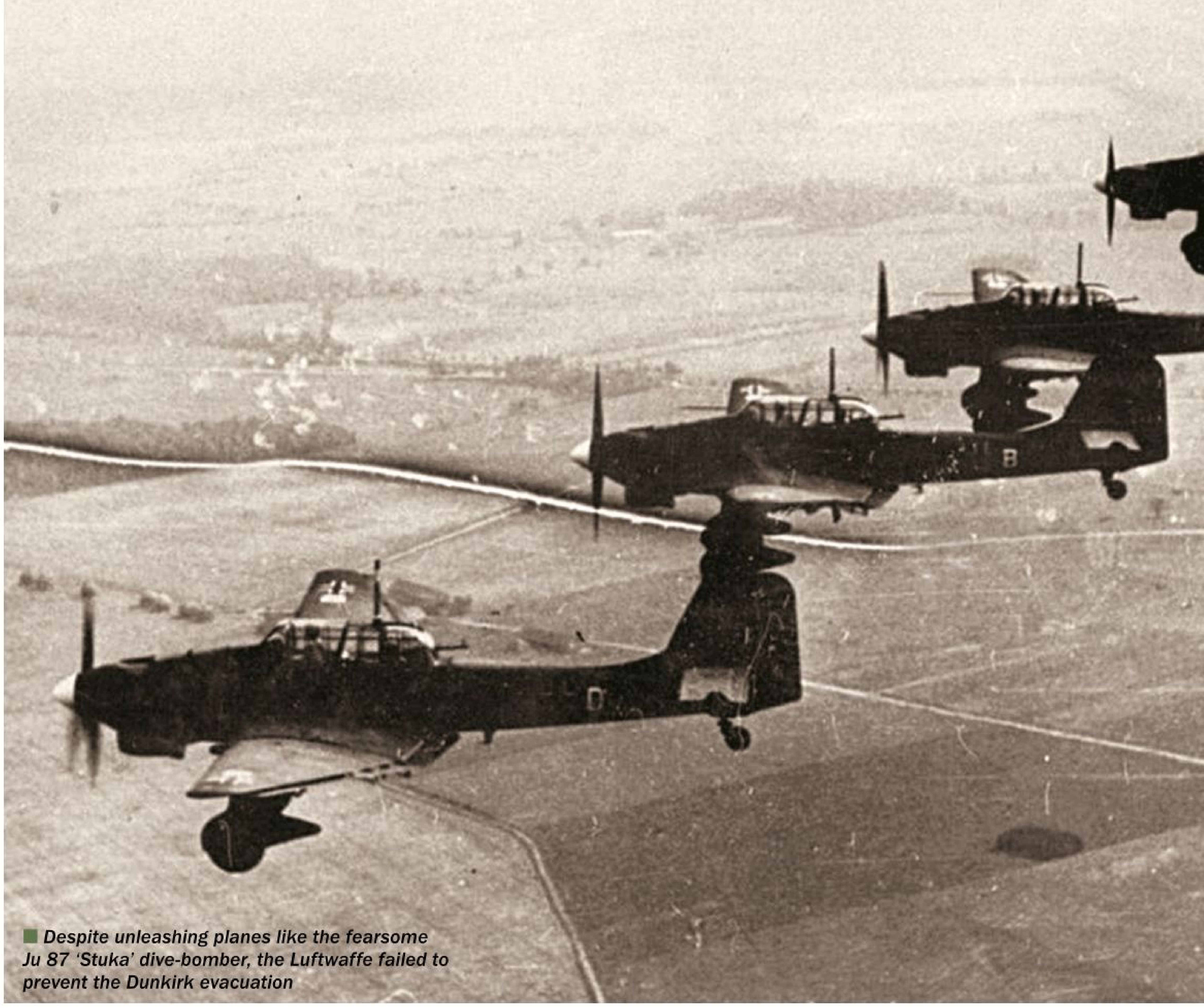
Thompson agrees with Churchill's assessment. "The RAF did all that it could in the circumstances," he says, "and the decision to hold fighters back was correct."

Extra fighters over the beaches of Dunkirk would undoubtedly have provided more protection for the men, and the ships striving to get them away. In the struggle to come, however, when the RAF and Royal Navy would man the front lines as Germany turned its attention to Britain, every plane would be needed.

THE FALL OF FRANCE

The tentative efforts to continue supporting the French even after the Dunkirk evacuation seem strange given how difficult it had been to get the first BEF out of France intact. Sending men back over to France, and in such small

"EXTRA FIGHTERS OVER THE BEACHES OF DUNKIRK WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY HAVE PROVIDED MORE PROTECTION FOR THE MEN, AND THE SHIPS STRIVING TO GET THEM AWAY"



Despite unleashing planes like the fearsome Ju 87 'Stuka' dive-bomber, the Luftwaffe failed to prevent the Dunkirk evacuation

THE FIGHTING MEN

How did the various armies perform in the build-up to the evacuation at Dunkirk?

Analysis of Dunkirk has to consider the fighting qualities of the men involved. The build-up to the evacuation offers a very clear snapshot of the respective armies involved, and it is an uncomfortable one.

"The French performance was bad," comments Major General Julian Thompson. "It was not helped by their concept of operations, as well as their command and communications setup and poor use of armour. They actually had more modern tanks than the Germans."

The French Char B1 bis tank should have been a formidable opponent for German panzers

This point is important, because it is often assumed that the Germans had perfected the art of war and unleashed unstoppable blitzkrieg tactics upon the rest of Europe, but in fact their equipment was often no better than that aligned against them. Panzer divisions formed the cutting edge of their forces, but the bulk were conventional infantry units. Speed of movement and the independent spirit of their commanding officers in the field were their major advantages, which just happened to match up perfectly against the slowness and a lack of initiative on the French side.

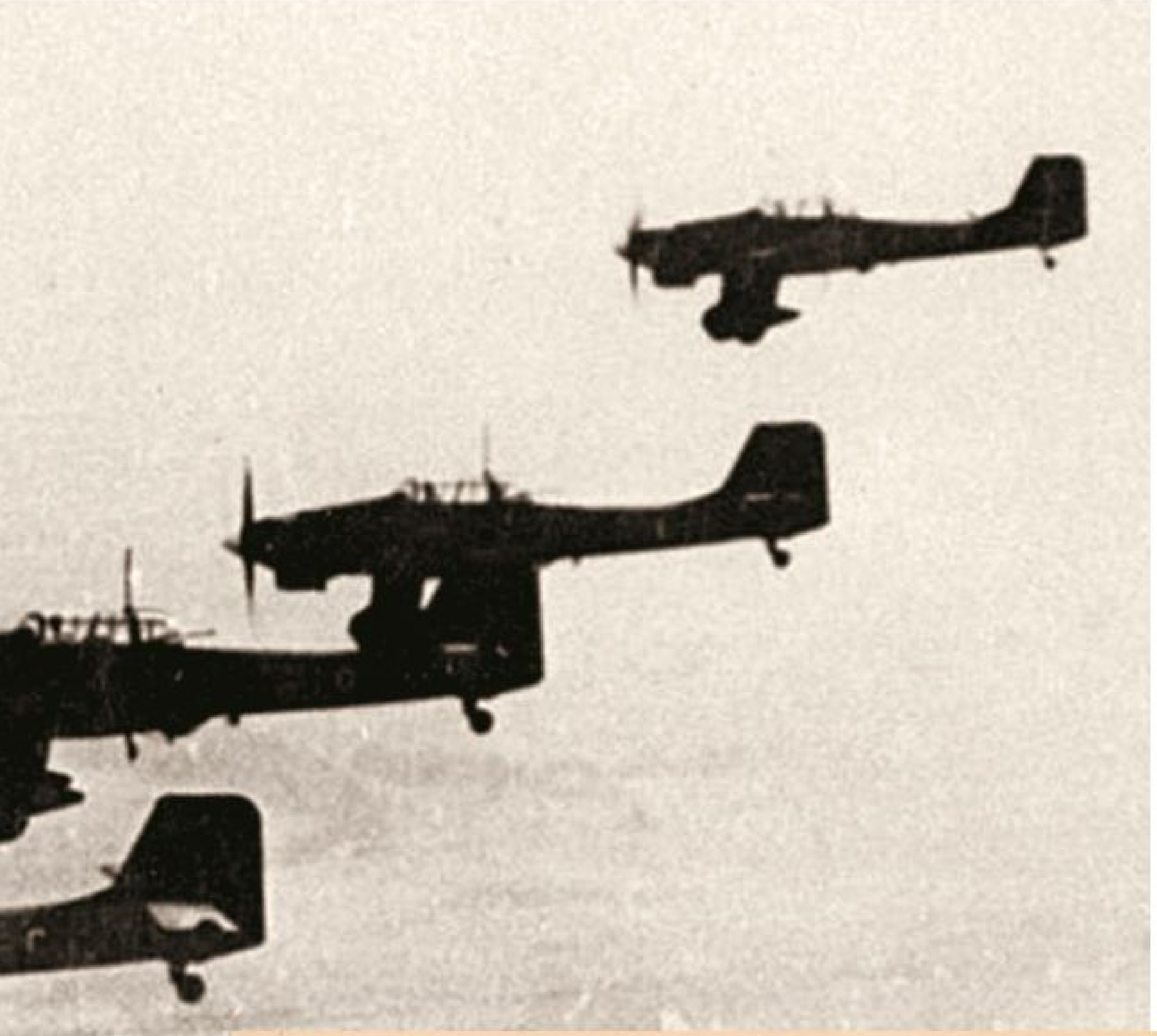
The swiftness of the French collapse was certainly shocking, with some units breaking on the mere rumour of German advances, but Thompson believes another of the allies performed even worse: "The Belgians were abysmal," he says.

The small BEF did relatively well, but was let down by its allies.

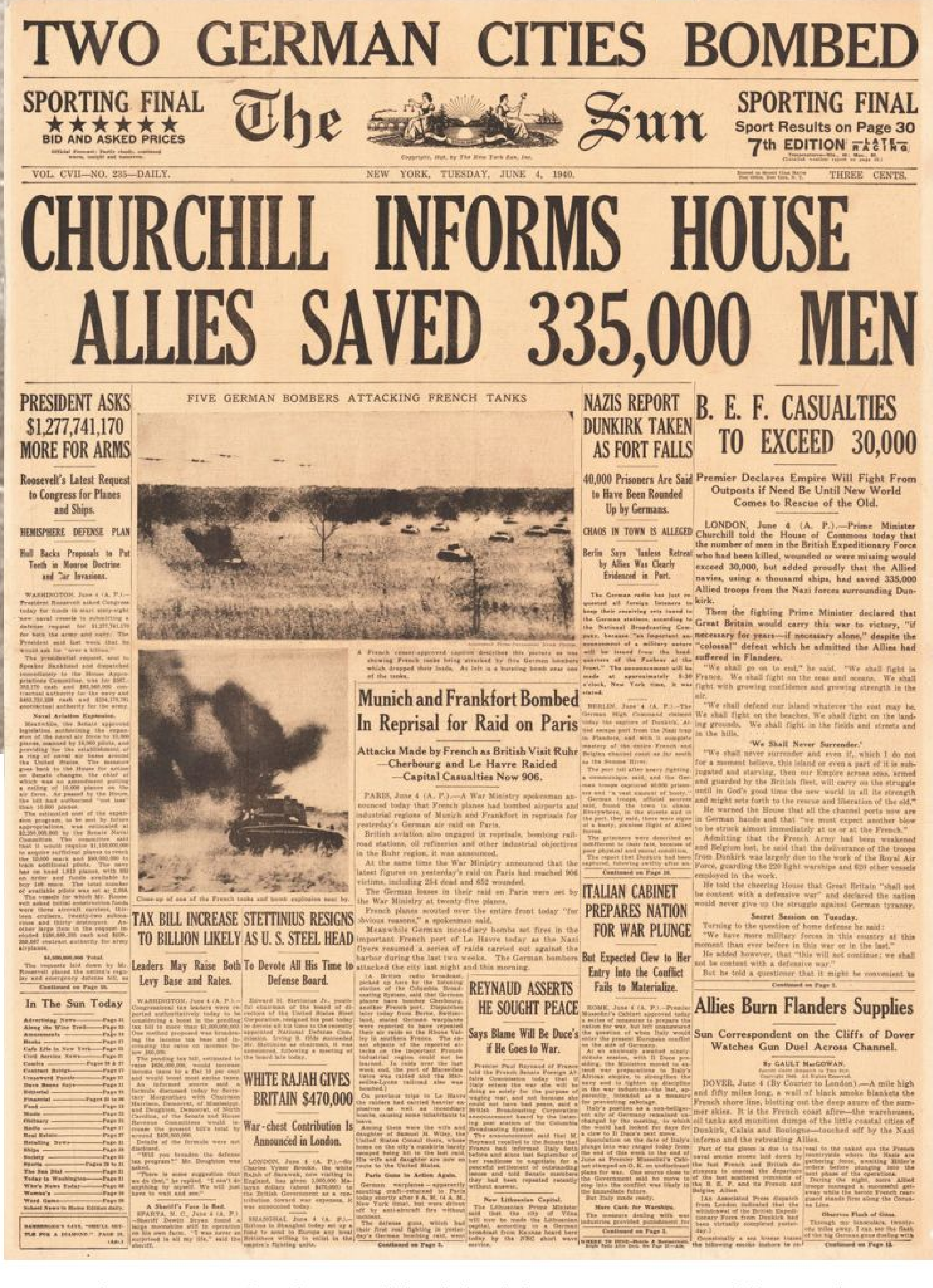
"The British did well in the circumstances," Thompson believes. "The French and Belgians on their flanks retreated and the British had no option but to follow suit. Von Bock's Sixth Army report included the following comment referring to the British soldier: 'in battle he was tough and dogged'. The BEF, of course, was not as well trained as the German army."

Which brings us to the final combatant, the all-conquering Germans.

"The Germans were brilliant at the tactical and operational level," Thompson says, but this was not to be enough. "It could win them a stunning victory, but not the war, and it was not the first time this situation had held true. Germany lost both World Wars because their strategy was faulty."



German commanders like Erwin Rommel were allowed to use their initiative to react quickly to events on the ground



TWO GERMAN CITIES BOMBED

SPORTING FINAL ★★★★★★ BID AND ASKED PRICES

The Sun

SPORTING FINAL Sport Results on Page 30 7th EDITION

VOL. CVII—NO. 235—DAILY. NEW YORK, TUESDAY, JUNE 4, 1940. THREE CENTS.

CHURCHILL INFORMS HOUSE ALLIES SAVED 335,000 MEN

PRESIDENT ASKS $1,277,741,170 MORE FOR ARMS

Roosevelt's Latest Request to Congress for Planes and Ships.

HEMISPHERE DEFENSE PLAN

Hull Backs Proposals to Put Teeth in Monroe Doctrine and Bar Invasions.

FIVE GERMAN BOMBERS ATTACKING FRENCH TANKS

Close-up of one of the French tanks and bomb explosion near by.

Munich and Frankfort Bombed In Reprisal for Raid on Paris

Attacks Made by French as British Visit Ruhr —Cherbourg and Le Havre Raided —Capital Casualties Now 906.

PARIS, June 4 (A. P.).—A War Ministry spokesman announced today that French planes had bombed airports and industrial regions of Munich and Frankfort in reprisals for yesterday's German air raid on Paris.

British aviation also engaged in reprisals, bombing railroad stations, oil refineries and other industrial objectives in the Ruhr region, it was announced.

At the same time the War Ministry announced that the latest figures on yesterday's raid on Paris had reached 906 victims, including 254 dead and 652 wounded.

The German losses in their raid on Paris were set by the War Ministry at twenty-five planes.

French planes scouted over the entire front today "for obvious reasons," a spokesman said.

Meanwhile German incendiary bombs set fires in the important French port of Le Havre today as the Nazi flyers resumed a series of raids carried out against the harbor during the last two weeks. The German bombers attacked the city last night and this morning.

NAZIS REPORT DUNKIRK TAKEN AS FORT FALLS

40,000 Prisoners Are Said to Have Been Rounded Up by Germans.

CHAOS IN TOWN IS ALLEGED

Berlin Says [illegible] Retreat by Allies Was Clearly Evidenced in Port.

B. E. F. CASUALTIES TO EXCEED 30,000

Premier Declares Empire Will Fight From Outposts if Need Be Until New World Comes to Rescue of the Old.

LONDON, June 4 (A. P.).—Prime Minister Churchill told the House of Commons today that the number of men in the British Expeditionary Force who had been killed, wounded or were missing would exceed 30,000, but added proudly that the Allied navies, using a thousand ships, had saved 335,000 Allied troops from the Nazi forces surrounding Dunkirk.

Then the fighting Prime Minister declared that Great Britain would carry this war to victory, "if necessary for years—if necessary alone," despite the "colossal" defeat which he admitted the Allies had suffered in Flanders.

"We shall go on to end," he said. "We shall fight in France. We shall fight on the seas and oceans. We shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air.

"We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and streets and in the hills.

'We Shall Never Surrender.'

"We shall never surrender and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this island or even a part of it is subjugated and starving, then our Empire across seas, armed and guarded by the British fleet, will carry on the struggle until in God's good time the new world in all its strength and might sets forth to the rescue and liberation of the old."

He warned the House that all the channel ports now are in German hands and that "we must expect another blow to be struck almost immediately at us or at the French."

Admitting that the French Army had been weakened and Belgium lost, he said that the deliverance of the troops from Dunkirk was largely due to the work of the Royal Air Force, guarding the 220 light warships and 629 other vessels employed in the work.

He told the cheering House that Great Britain "shall not be content with a defensive war" and declared the nation would never give up the struggle against German tyranny.

Secret Session on Tuesday.

Turning to the question of home defense he said:

"We have more military forces in this country at this moment than ever before in this war or in the last."

He added however, that "this will not continue; we shall not be content with a defensive war."

But he told a questioner that it might be convenient to

Continued on Page 3.

ITALIAN CABINET PREPARES NATION FOR WAR PLUNGE

But Expected Clew to Her Entry Into the Conflict Fails to Materialize.

TAX BILL INCREASE TO BILLION LIKELY

Leaders May Raise Both Levy Base and Rates.

STETTINIUS RESIGNS AS U. S. STEEL HEAD

To Devote All His Time to Defense Board.

WHITE RAJAH GIVES BRITAIN $470,000

War-chest Contribution Is Announced in London.

REYNAUD ASSERTS HE SOUGHT PEACE

Says Blame Will Be Duce's if He Goes to War.

In The Sun Today

Allies Burn Flanders Supplies

Sun Correspondent on the Cliffs of Dover Watches Gun Duel Across Channel.

By GAULT MacGOWAN.

DOVER, June 4 (By Courier to London).—A mile high and fifty miles long, a wall of black smoke blankets the French shore line, blotting out the deep azure of the summer skies. It is the French coast afire—the warehouses, oil tanks and munition dumps of the little coastal cities of Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne—touched off by the Nazi inferno and the retreating Allies.

Continued on Page 12.

The immense propaganda value of the successful evacuation was felt across the Atlantic in America

"ANY DECISION TO WAIT AND SEE WHAT THE NEXT DAY WAS GOING TO BRING COULD HAVE BEEN FATAL"

numbers, was clearly a political decision. Churchill's attempt to get Sir Alan Brooke to stand and fight with the French was clearly also highly risky and motivated by a desire to appear resolute in support of the French.

The fact that the men sent over had to be evacuated almost immediately bears this out, and Thompson has no doubt that there was little point in sending more units over.

"The French had 'had it', as Brooke perceived," Thompson explains. "The second BEF would have gone into the bag with the French. In fact, the French were negotiating surrender while the second BEF was still arriving at Cherbourg."

Of great importance, therefore, in any analysis of Dunkirk, is the recognition that both Lord Gort (with the first BEF) and Brooke (with the second) took courageous decisions when under intense pressure to stand their ground. Any delay, any decision to wait and see what the next day was going to bring could have been fatal, and the loss of the BEF would, Thompson believes, have been disastrous.

"The rescue of the BEF was absolutely vital," he says. "Had the BEF been captured, it is impossible to believe that Britain could have fought on, and would have had to come to some accommodation with Hitler."

A German invasion attempt would still likely have been defeated by the RAF and Royal Navy, but without the presence of a professional army, Britain would have felt even more exposed, which would have damaged morale.

"In this situation I don't think Hitler would have necessarily tried invading," says Thompson. "An invasion would have been defeated at sea and in the air anyway. Hitler would instead have welcomed an accommodation with Britain."

Finally, the achievement of the German forces must be acknowledged. Such was their speed of movement, and so slow was the French response, that the fall of France may have been inevitable whatever happened after those first few frantic days of Fall Gelb.

"It's difficult to say if the fall of France was inevitable," Thompson says. "It depends on the point at which the French might have staged a comeback. The fact that they had no strategic reserve made restoring the situation following the German armoured thrust from Sedan to the sea almost impossible to achieve."

ICONIC MOMENT

A German troop rests on the side of his tank on 10 May 1940. Fall Gelb pushed panzer units to the limit – would allied bombing raids in the Ardennes have pushed them over it?

WHAT IF...

HEERESGRUPPE A HAD BEEN BOMBED IN THE ARDENNES?

THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE, FALL GELB, RELIED HEAVILY ON SPEED, BUT ALL DID NOT GO ACCORDING TO PLAN

German precision and meticulous planning is taken for granted, but Fall Gelb had a potentially fatal flaw. If the massive formations of Heeresgruppe A got snarled up in the Ardennes, it could put them behind schedule, and that might have been disastrous as the entire plan depended on them reaching and crossing the Meuse before the French could recover from the initial breakthrough.

As it happened, the Germans' worst fears were realised, as several infantry divisions tried to cross the path of the panzer divisions of Gruppe Kleist, causing a massive traffic jam – a large portion of Heeresgruppe A was stationary and hugely vulnerable if spotted. Disaster loomed when Allied reconnaissance planes did spot them, but their reports were dismissed as irrelevant, and so the 170-mile tailbacks were resolved and Fall Gelb progressed.

Military historian David Smith considers what might have happened had the reconnaissance plane reports been believed.

What had gone wrong with German planning at this stage to cause such a disastrous snarl-up?
First, it was clear that just such a mammoth traffic jam had been feared. Kleist's corps were only allocated four roads through the Ardennes, the rest being devoted to the slow-moving infantry divisions. If Kleist's armoured formations ground to a halt, it would be the infantry that would need to carry the battle.

A rigid schedule was therefore laid out for each division, but while some divisions stuck to their timetable, others (whether through lack of training or inferior officer performance) did not. The result was a blockage of epic proportions.

Why were the reconnaissance plane reports dismissed?
Quite simply, there was such a strong belief that the Ardennes were impassable to large formations that the reports were never taken seriously. Reports came in of German units moving through the region on 10 May, the following morning and the following night, as well as on the afternoon of 12 May. Each report might have been dismissible, but the fact that so many repeated the same story should have set alarm bells off. Instead, they were dismissed as a feint, when it was actually the attacks to the north that were the feint.

Could Allied bombing raids have been mounted?
Yes, but they would have been costly, and the scale of them would have depended on when the reconnaissance reports were taken seriously. The Luftwaffe began its bombing missions on 10 May, which started the process of degrading Allied air power. The Fairey Battles in particular took heavy losses, but were largely ineffective anyway. The Blenheims of the Advanced Air Striking Force only started to take losses in the ensuing days, so they could theoretically have struck the mass of tanks and motorised vehicles if orders had been given quickly. The French could have thrown in some obsolescent Amiot 143M night bombers (as they did to contest the Meuse crossings), and a small number of Loiré-et-Olivier (LeO) 451 medium bombers. There wasn't a lot for the Allies to use, in truth.

Remember also that Heeresgruppe B was causing its share of problems in the north. Bomber raids were needed to strike bridges captured by the advancing Germans and these came at a heavy price (74 sorties were made in the first three days of the battle, with 33 aircraft lost).

Could Heeresgruppe A have been stopped in its tracks?
Yes, but only temporarily. There was significant fighter cover over the armoured columns, which would have taken a heavy toll on any attacking formations, but a traffic jam is a tempting target, and as well as putting vehicles out of action, air strikes could have caused panic and would certainly have added to the chaos.

With more than 41,000 vehicles in Gruppe Kleist, the bombers would have been spoilt for

"IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN A CLOSER FIGHT, BUT THE SMALL NUDGE IN THE ALLIES' FAVOUR BY EXPLOITING THE CONFUSION OF THE INITIAL ADVANCE WOULD PROBABLY NOT HAVE BEEN ENOUGH"

choice – assuming fighter escorts could have kept the German Bf 109s off their backs. Even then, anti-aircraft defence from the columns themselves would have been fierce. When 18 Breguet 693 aircraft had attacked XVI AK in the north, for example, ten were lost to anti-aircraft fire.

The critical question would be how hard and how often bombers could hit the German traffic jam. Add an extra day to the Germans' already disrupted schedule and the delay would have been shrugged off fairly easily. Hold it up for longer, or inflict serious losses, and the odds would begin to tip towards the Allies. In a dream scenario, smashing so many divisions before they even entered the fight could have been a knockout blow, but that would have required considerably more air power than the Allies had at their disposal.

What impact might this have had on the ensuing battle?

A race is always going to be one-sided when only one of the participants recognises it as a race. The slow reaction of French forces was down to the fact that they had not considered the possibility of the Germans looking to simply break out and head for the coast.

Even when it became clear that a major move was being made towards Sedan, there was little or no urgency. On the evening of 12 May, reserve units were ordered forward, but were told to reach their new positions in two days. It is distinctly possible, therefore, that even successful raids against the confused mass of vehicles might not have bought enough time to compensate for the chronically slow-moving French. The French believed that they had as much as six days, while (they believed) the Germans brought up heavy artillery, to prepare their response. Even so, by preventing Heeresgruppe A from advancing swiftly (or, to be more accurate, to pile more chaos and confusion onto an existing situation), extra precious time could have been bought.

The main reserve force, however – the French 7th Army – had already been moved to the extreme north of the Allied line. From its original position it would have been well placed to move up and counter the German thrust through the Ardennes, and if that German advance had been slowed by bombing missions, then even the slow deployment typical of the French might not have been such a problem.

Would the retreat to Dunkirk have been necessary?

Almost certainly. The German breakthrough might have been slowed, and better resistance offered, but the final analysis still pits German forces determined to move quickly against the tortuously slow French command system. Even when the armoured thrust was recognised as the principal German gambit, the French misunderstood its purpose, believing it would swing round to tackle the Maginot line from the rear. The dash to the coast, which undermined the position of the northern French forces and the BEF, was simply undreamed of, and by the time it was (belatedly) recognised, there was no reserve to call upon to counter it.

Would Fall Gelb have still succeeded?

It is difficult to see how it could have failed. It might have been a closer fight, but the small nudge in the Allies' favour by exploiting the confusion of the initial advance would probably not have been enough to swing the battle in their favour.

There was one element that might have worked for the Allies. The German soldiers, popping Pervitin (a methamphetamine drug) in order to stay awake for the days necessary to implement Fall Gelb, were exhausted by the time the battle was over. They had been provided with 35 million tablets and instructed

HOW WOULD IT BE DIFFERENT?

FALL GELB BEGINS
10 MAY
The great German campaign swings into action, with the 'matador's cloak' deception to the north aiming to draw the attention of the Allies and mask the real thrust through the Ardennes.

THE LUFTWAFFE STRIKES
10 MAY
Sustained attacks on Allied airbases begin, gradually weakening their ability to contest the Luftwaffe's air supremacy and resist German ground advances.

THE GERMAN DECEPTION WORKS
11 MAY
Believing the attack through Belgium to be the main thrust, British and French troops move up to their prearranged positions along the Dyle. Little attention is paid to the Ardennes.

GERMANS SPOTTED IN THE ARDENNES
10-12 MAY
Reconnaissance planes report German columns moving through the Ardennes on at least four separate occasions. Believing these columns to be a feint, the reports are ignored.

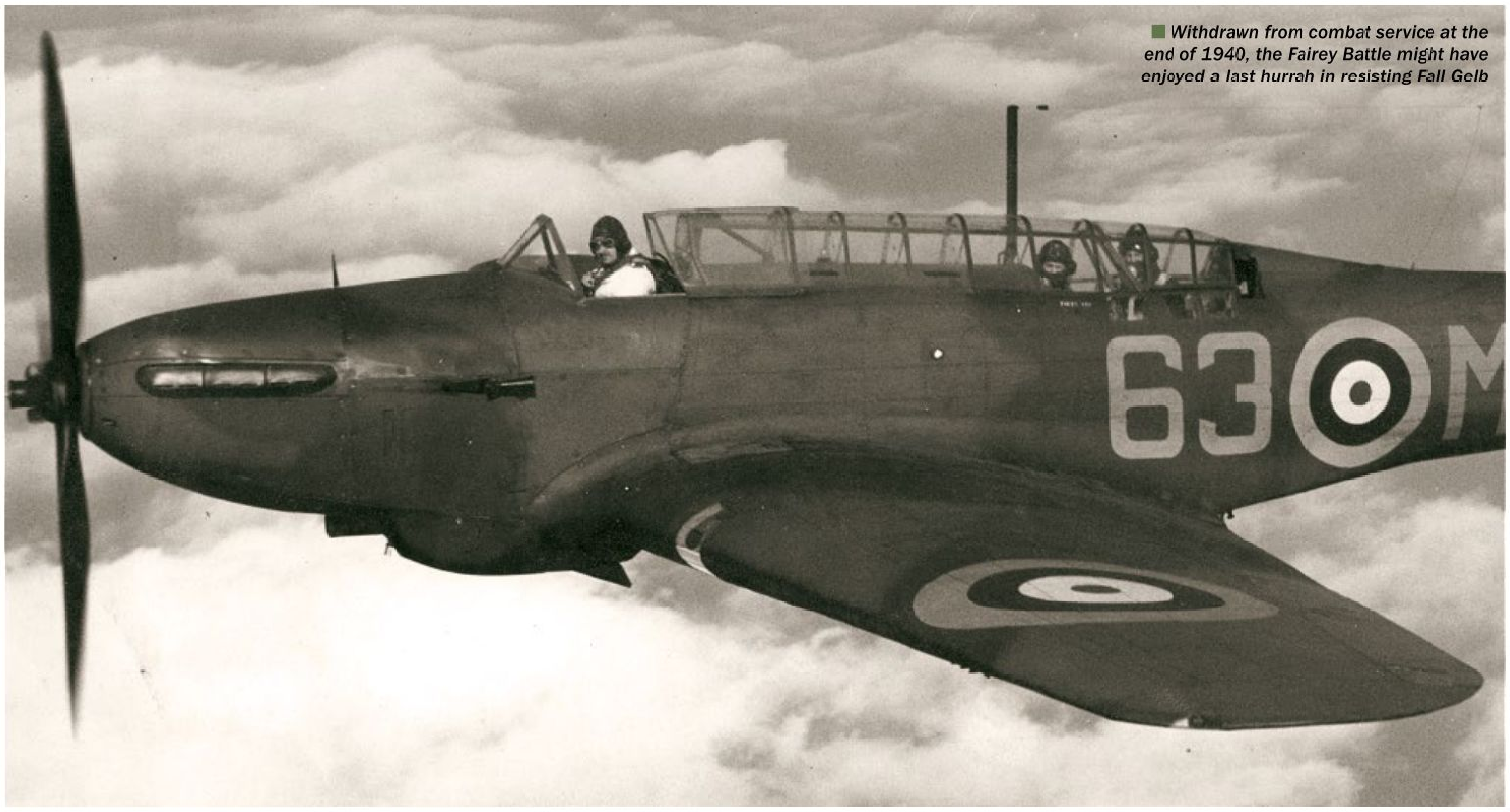
REAL TIMELINE

GUDERIAN MOUNTS HIS PANZER BREAKOUT
15 MAY
Having won his argument with Kleist (who favoured solidifying their position) Guderian begins his dash for the coast, threatening to isolate Allied forces in the north, including the BEF.

ALTERNATE TIMELINE

GERMANS SPOTTED IN THE ARDENNES
11 MAY
Following a report, on the night of 10 May, of German columns moving through the Ardennes, further reconnaissance flights are ordered the following morning, confirming that a major thrust is underway.

FIRST BOMBING RAIDS ON GERMAN COLUMNS
11 MAY
Concentrating as much force as possible, the Allies launch a series of bombing raids on the advancing Germans. Supported by Hurricane fighter escorts, the raids cause confusion among the advancing Germans.



Withdrawn from combat service at the end of 1940, the Fairey Battle might have enjoyed a last hurrah in resisting Fall Gelb

on proper dosage to stave off the need to indulge in pointless sleep. Might an extra day or two of stress and combat have proved too much even for Pervitin-fuelled troops to withstand?

Could the war have descended into stalemate?

Even if the Germans had been stopped cold, there was little chance of a return to the static warfare of the last great conflict. Offensive technology had improved to the extent that breakthroughs of trench positions could be exploited much more easily and rapidly. The nightmare of a rerun of World War I's carnage was just that.

So the final analysis of this 'what if' scenario is....

There was most probably no way of resisting the German offensive and, therefore, the need to evacuate the BEF. Even under better conditions and with pre-warning, the French army was crippled by its own slowness of thought. Like a great, powerful body with a faulty nervous system, it was unable to react quickly enough to unfolding events. It would take a more dramatic 'what if' than this to have changed history.

EVACUATION PLANNING BEGINS
20 MAY
As Guderian's forces reach the Channel coast, planning begins for an evacuation of the BEF. Non-essential personnel have already been ordered back to Britain.

THE COUNTERATTACK AT ARRAS
21 MAY
Threatening the flanks of the German armoured divisions, the Allied counterattack highlights their isolation from the slow-moving infantry units. The possibility of being cut off rattles German commanders.

THE HALT ORDER
24 MAY
Wanting to conserve panzer units for the next stage, Fall Rot, German armoured units are ordered to stop their advance. Heeresgruppe B will complete the job of annihilating the surrounded Allied forces.

OPERATION DYNAMO BEGINS
27 MAY
The evacuation of BEF and French forces begins, eventually plucking more than 350,000 men from the beaches around Dunkirk. The evacuation is so successful, it is viewed as a quasi-victory.

THE TRAFFIC JAM
12 MAY
German organisation falls apart as armoured and infantry divisions become hopelessly entangled, resulting in massive tailbacks. Allied bomber missions continue through the day, sustaining heavy losses, but adding to the chaos on the ground.

FALL GELB STALLS
13 MAY
With vehicles and men tailing back 170 miles, the German thrust through the Ardennes grinds to a halt. Allied bombing missions have ceased due to unsustainable losses, but the offensive has been halted.

CROSSING THE MEUSE
15 MAY
Days behind schedule, Heinz Guderian's panzer units cross the Meuse, but are forced to hold their bridgehead until sufficient units arrive to effect a breakout.

EXHAUSTION SETS IN
20 MAY
Still pushing through France towards the coast, German units begin to suffer from severe exhaustion after days of Pervitin-fuelled sleep deprivation and constant action.

THE COUNTERATTACK AT ARRAS
21 MAY
An Allied counterattack at Arras threatens to punch through the German line. Fearing being cut off, the advanced units are halted.

GERMAN FORCES REACH THE COAST
24 MAY
Operating on their last reserves of energy, Guderian's units reach the Channel coast, closing the door on the Allied forces to the north, but are unable to continue offensive operations.

EVACUATION PLANNING BEGINS
25 MAY
Even without help from the exhausted panzer divisions, Heeresgruppe B presses Allied forces back. Plans begin for an evacuation.

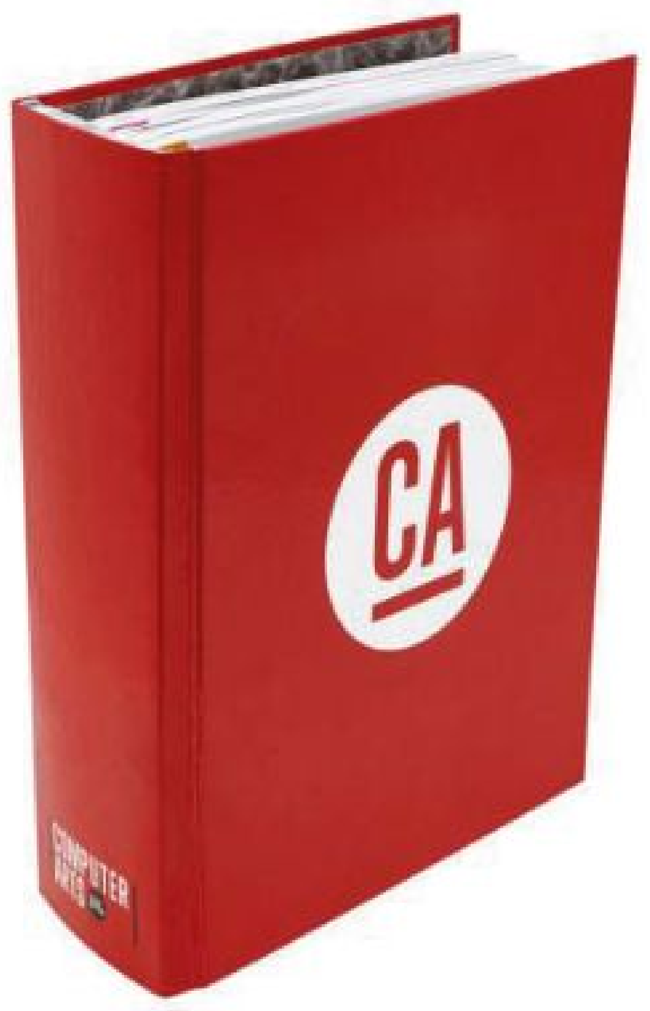
OPERATION DYNAMO BEGINS
29 MAY
Having come so close to stopping the German offensive, the decision is made to withdraw the BEF. Men are plucked from the beaches around Dunkirk.

SUBSCRIBE AND SAVE UP TO 61%

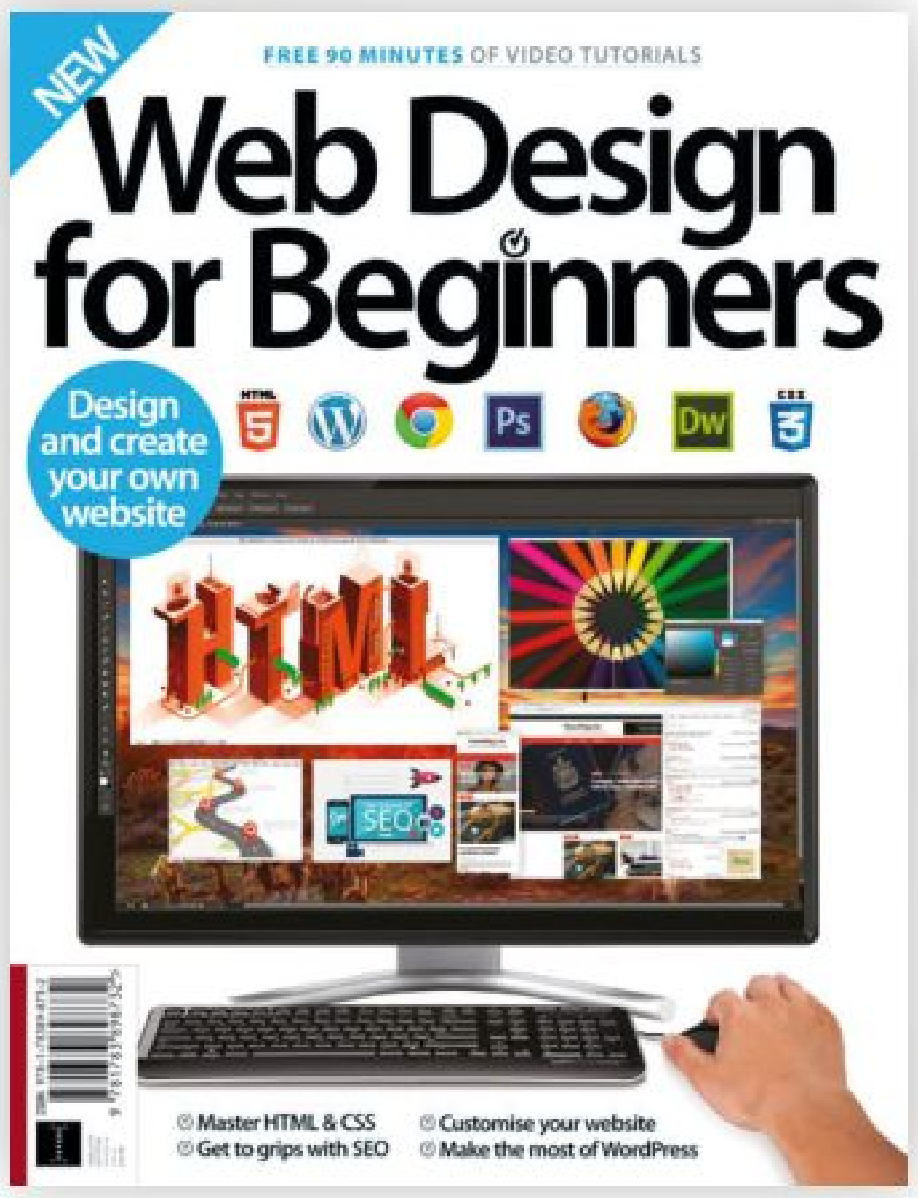
Every issue of your subscription, delivered direct to your door. Print & digital editions available.

NEAT STORAGE

Store up to 13 issues of your magazine subscription in a coordinating slipcase or binder.

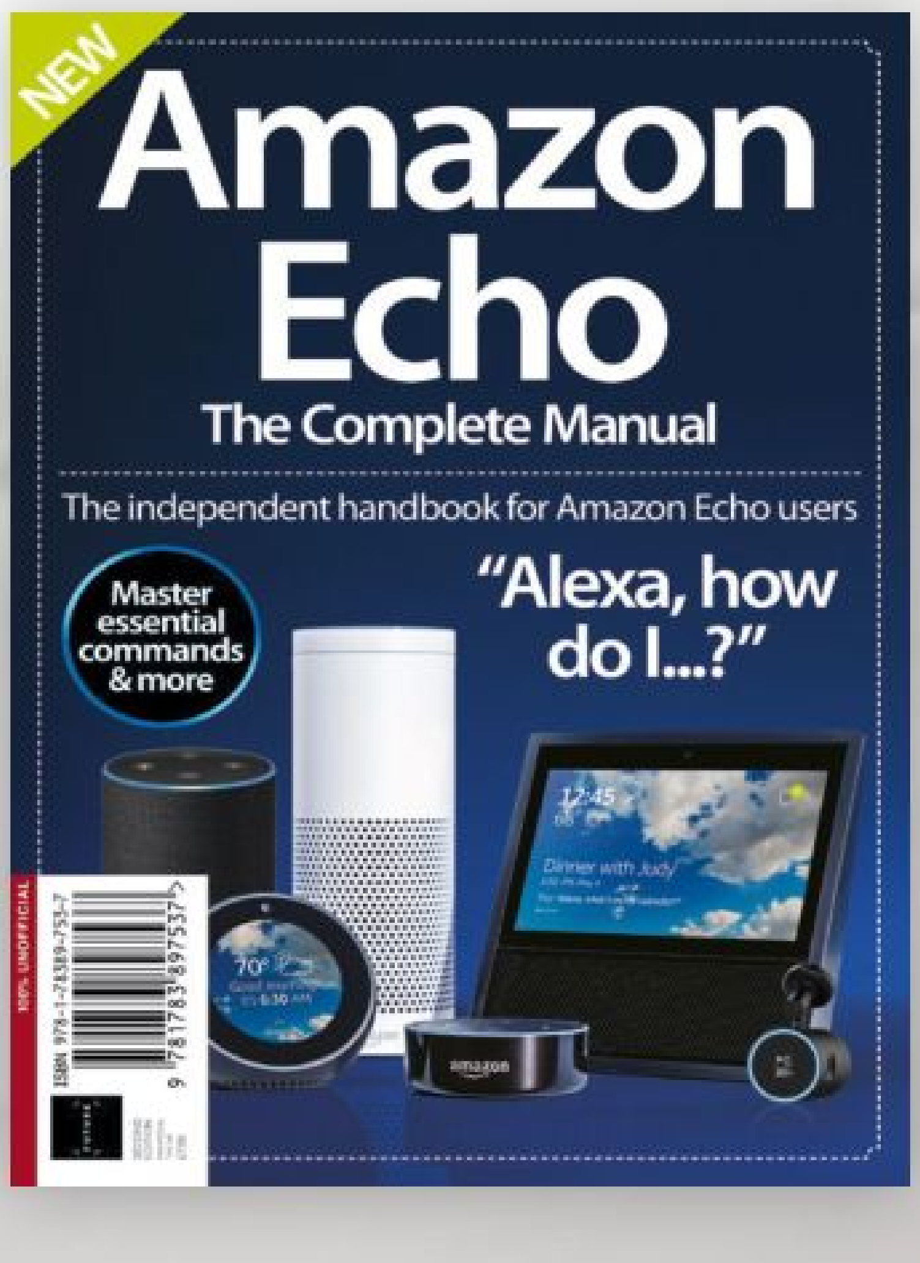
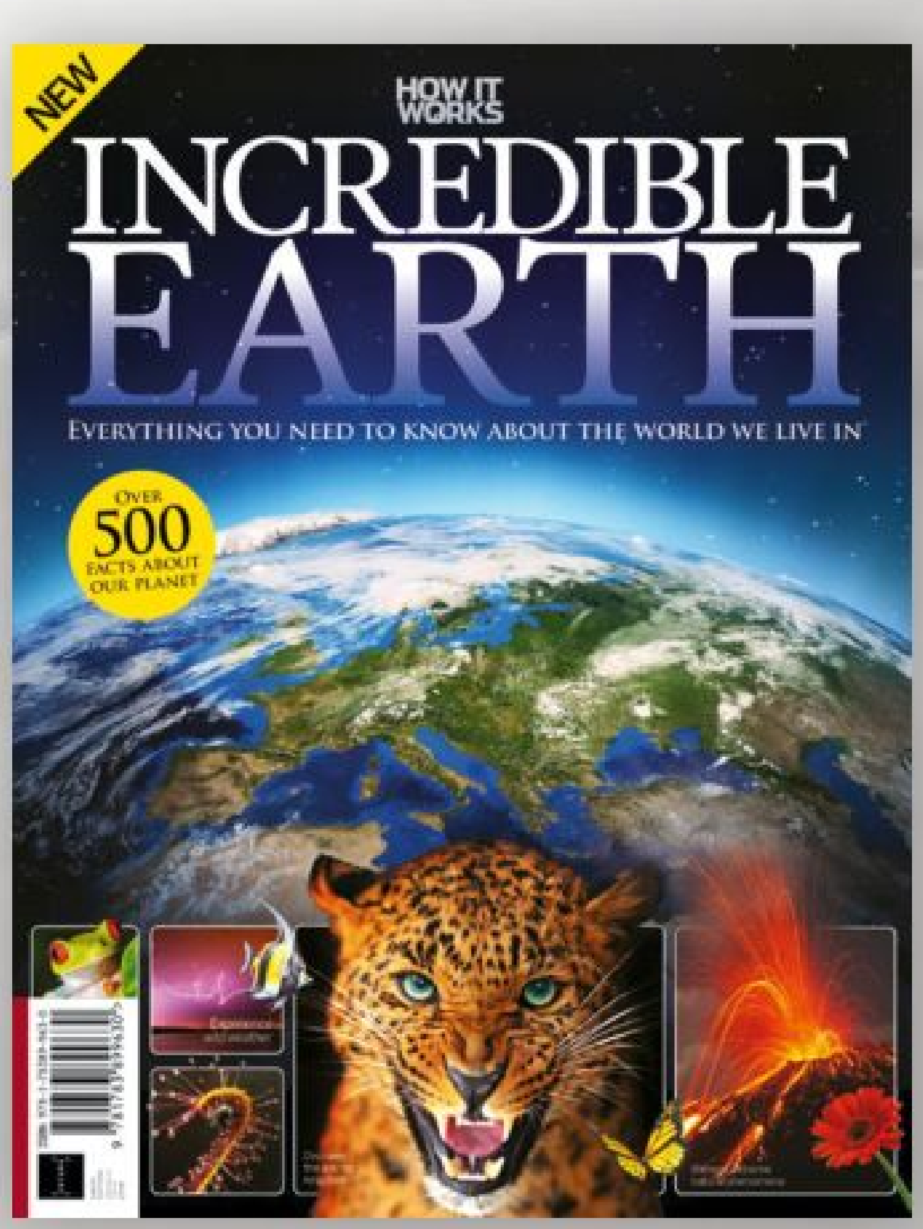
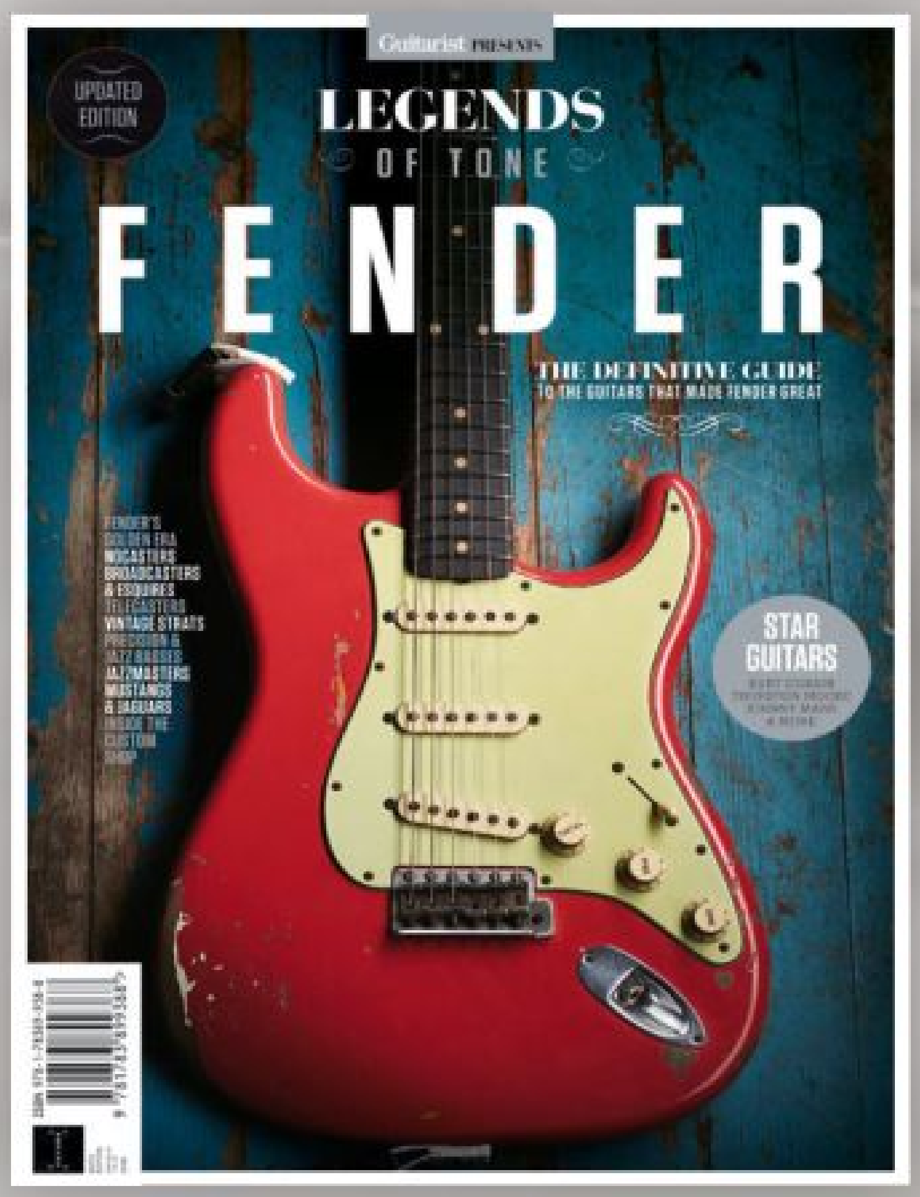


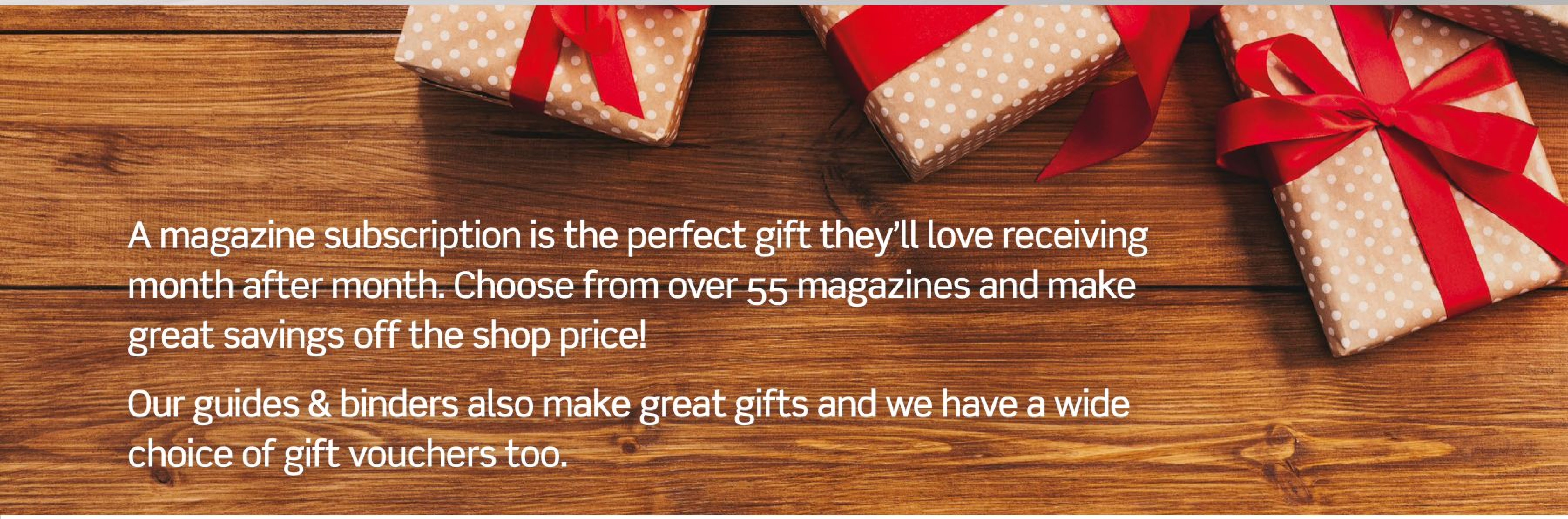
myfavouritemagazines.co.uk



DISCOVER GREAT GUIDES & SPECIALS

From photography to music and technology to gaming,
there's something for everyone.



A magazine subscription is the perfect gift they'll love receiving month after month. Choose from over 55 magazines and make great savings off the shop price!

Our guides & binders also make great gifts and we have a wide choice of gift vouchers too.

✓ No hidden costs Shipping included in all prices We deliver to over 100 countries Secure online payment

FUTURE

myfavouritemagazines
Official Magazine Subscription Store

Discover another of our great bookazines

From science and history to technology and crafts, there are dozens of Future bookazines to suit all tastes

✓ Get great savings when you buy direct from us

✓ 1000s of great titles, many not available anywhere else

✓ World-wide delivery and super-safe ordering

FUTURE

www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

Magazines, back issues & bookazines.

HISTORY of WAR
Book of

DUNKIRK

EXPLORE THE KEY EVENTS SURROUNDING THE ICONIC EVACUATION OF DUNKIRK

PREPARING FOR THE GERMAN INVASION

THE BEF MADE THE MOST OF THE PRELUDE TO THE GERMAN ATTACK WITH TRAINING, MANOEUVRES AND A HERCULEAN ENTRENCHING EFFORT

“THE AMERICANS COINED THE PHRASE PHONEY WAR TO DESCRIBE THE EIGHT-MONTH PERIOD IN WHICH NO MAJOR OFFENSIVE WAS LAUNCHED BY EITHER SIDE ON THE CONTINENT”

THE BUILD-UP

Learn all about the significant events of World War II that led to the Dunkirk evacuation taking place

DESPERATION AT DUNKIRK

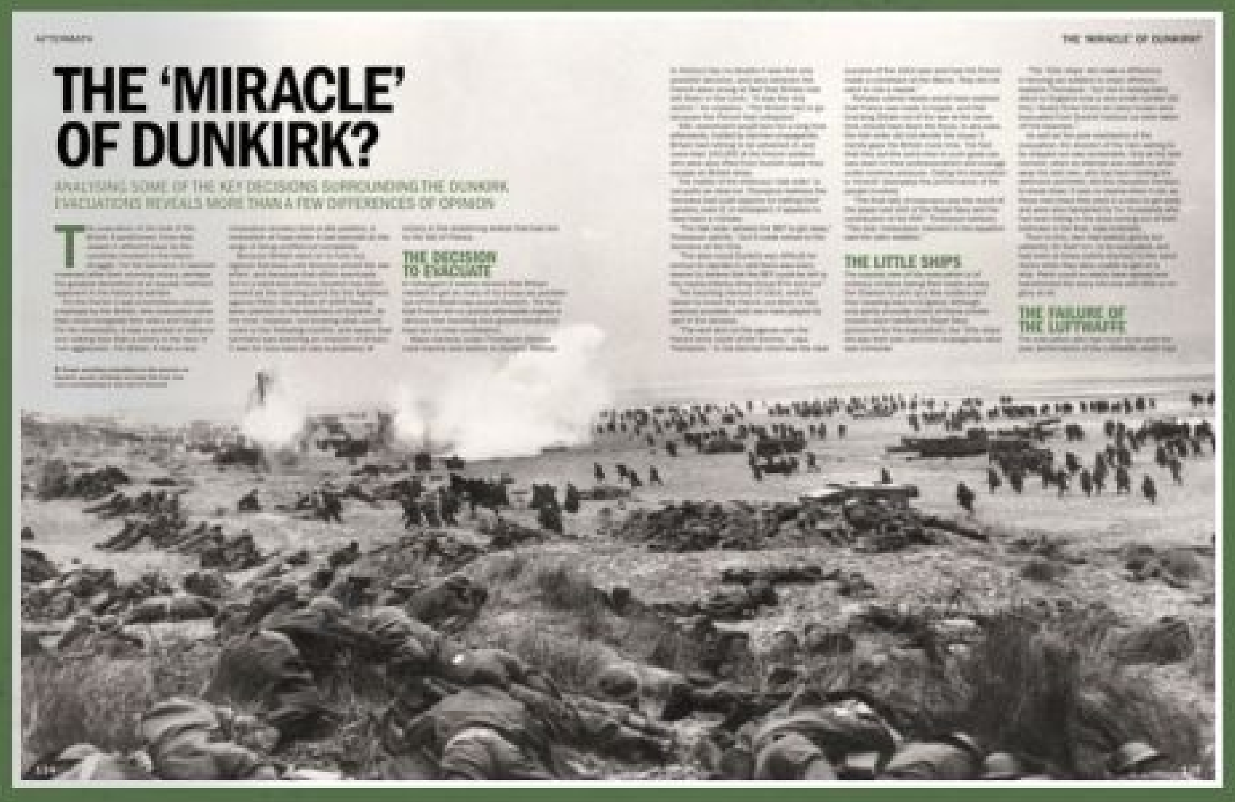
BRITISH COMMANDERS APPROVE AN EPIC SEALIFT EVACUATION TO SAVE THOUSANDS OF ALLIED SOLDIERS FROM CAPTURE OR ANNIHILATION BY GERMAN FORCES

KING GEORGE VI OFFERS SOLACE

As the anxious British people read reports of the deteriorating situation in France, the king attended services at Westminster Abbey

THE EVACUATION

Discover what was involved in such an epic rescue mission that saved the lives of thousands of soldiers



THE ‘MIRACLE’ OF DUNKIRK?

ANALYSING SOME OF THE KEY DECISIONS SURROUNDING THE DUNKIRK EVACUATIONS REVEALS MORE THAN A FEW DIFFERENCES OF OPINION

THE DECISION TO EVACUATE

THE LITTLE SHIPS

THE FAILURE OF THE LUFTWAFFE

THE AFTERMATH

Find out what happened next, analyse crucial decisions made, and assess views on whether it truly was a miracle

KEY PLAYER

HEINZ GUDERIAN

FAST HEINZ'S PANZERS POWERED TOWARDS THE COAST, SHOCKING THE ALLIES AND HIS SUPERIORS

KEY PLAYERS

Examine in-depth profiles of the commanders involved, both before and during the Dunkirk evacuation

BOOKAZINE